ARTH401-01: Cabinets of Curiosity: The History of Museums

Spring 2012; T 5-7:30 pm, Young 423

Instructor: Prof. Roann Barris
email: rbarris@radford.edu
Office: 213 PF; Phone: 831-6001
HRS: T H 9-10:45; W 9 - 12; other times by appt

This class is required for art history majors. Other students may use it to fill an art history/museum studies elective requirement.

Course description:
The first course in the museum studies sequence, this class focuses on the history of museums. To paraphrase Mary Anne Staniszewski, in the introduction to her book on The Power of Display, art history traditionally studies the work of art as a discrete fact, but the reality is that we (and the public) never see art works as isolated units. Whether part of a permanent collection or a temporary special exhibition, each work is an actor in a staged context that influences not merely our response but how and what we see. This is true for any museum, whether an art museum, science, anthropology, or some other kind; consequently, we will not limit our focus to art museums. Inevitably, we will touch on the role of exhibitions but exhibition histories are the focus of the second course in this sequence.

Course format:
Seminar: This is a small class and everyone will be expected to participate equally, rigorously, and regularly. Some of our readings will be shared; other readings will be individually selected and the reader will be expected to provide an overview to the entire group. Everyone will also engage in research on an individual project for presentation at the end of the semester. Ongoing reports of work accomplished and questions raised will be part of class meetings.

Readings:
Refworks bibliography: login as Cabinets and use as the pw: spring2012

Requirements
• You must attend every class. Being present means being awake, being interested, and being prepared, and turning off your cell/IPAD, etc.
• Each class missed will lower your grade by half a letter grade; five absences will be an automatic F.
• Do all readings and participate in discussions. Prepare summaries, outlines, etc.
Topics and Schedule
(approximately one topic each week but flexibility prevails! Required readings are included but you are encouraged to do additional readings from the textbooks and bibliography)

I. History and typologies of museums:
Reading: Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum” (attachment available in Refworks)
As you read this article, identify at least 3 basic assumptions guiding the authors. How do they support their assumptions? How might they be supported by arguments not made by the authors? What arguments could be made against these assumptions?

II. The public survey museum (continued from week 1)
Reading: Duncan, CR, chapters 1 and 2 (chapter 1 is material is similar to the article from last week; chapter 2 provides more elaboration of the Louvre rituals and compares it to a British museum)
Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum” (attachment in Refworks) 
Exhibiting Culture (EC): introduction to part 1; chapter 1 by S. Alpers (introduces the role of exhibitions and provides another way of talking about museums)
Focus in particular on alternatives to Duncan’s theory of ritual and the origins of the public museum.

III. Museums which are not museums, pt 1: the fair/expo museum
examples: Crystal Palace, the Chicago Exposition of 1892, the NY World’s Fair of 1939, etc.
Read: EC, introduction to part 4 and the chapters in that section
MC, chapter 13
Rydell, “World Fairs and Museums” (Refworks att.)
How do these “non-museums” relate to the traditional idea of a museum? What do they offer the spectator/public? Apart from impermanence, what problems do they raise?

IV. Museums of modern art: public and private
CR, chapter 5
Museum Culture (MC; e-book, link included in Refworks), chapter 9 (raises two issues, one concerning the “abuse” of art by a political exhibition, and the other concerning an exhibition which is not in a museum)
EC: chapters 7 and 8
Although the degenerate art show is a very specific example of the misuse of modern art, what issues are raised in less political situations about modern art and museums? How have some museums attempted to resolve these issues? You may need to do extra reading to answer this question!

V. Non-museum museums, part 2: the house museum and the donor museum
CR, chapter 4
MC, chapter 12
choose: Domesticating History (on house museums) or one of the books about a specific donor museum – these are on reserve in McConnell
How do these museums differ from public and municipal museums? Why are women disproportionately represented in the area of donor museums?

VI. Eco-museums and memorial museums
MC, chapter 4
Akcan, “Apology and Triumph” (link in Refworks)
What is an eco-museum and what is the guiding strategy for creating one? When is a museum a memorial? Are all museums memorials?

Presentations and Feedback: short presentations based on project proposals will be done in weeks 7 and 8 (preferably Feb. 28; possibly Mar. 13). Final presentations will be done during the final exam time slot (May 1, 5:30 pm).

VII - VIII. Other Cultures, film and science
Choose readings from EC and from Representing Africa for class discussion. Everyone read articles by Anderson, Boyd, Gurian, and Koster in Daedalus issue devoted to museums (see Refworks).
How do cultural variables influence exhibition practices? Does the idea of museum vary from one culture to another? How will new technology continue to influence museums? What are some examples of the impact of technology on museums?

IX. Museum ethics
CR, chapter 3
at least chapters 1 and 2 in Ethics and the Visual Arts; chapter 26 in Museum Studies (e-book)
What ethical issues face museums and curators? Are the ethical responsibilities of a museum different from those of a curator? What is meant by the public trust when it comes to museums? (What are the obligations of a museum to the public?) How have these obligations been violated in recent years?

X. Museum architecture
Part III, at least chapters 14 and 15 in Museum Studies (e-book, see Refworks for link)

Grading
Class participation (100 points), the project proposal (100), and the major project (300) are the sources of your grade. I will ask you to assess your own participation, using a rubric that I give you. Smaller projects may be introduced on an ad hoc basis – these will contribute to your participation grade. Sometimes these unplanned projects provide inspiration for the longer, big project, so you should always take them seriously.

Term project: the biography of a museum
You will analyze and study the history of a museum’s coming into existence, its changes over time, the responses of visitors and staff to the museum, and anticipated problems or new directions for the future. The project will involve the use of books, the museum website (if it has one), and interviews (either in person, by email or by phone) with people who work at the museum and visit it. Determination of directions for the future will probably involve your
ability to compare the museum you choose to other museums of a similar type. Depending on the museum you choose, it may be possible to access archival documents. Many of the readings on your bibliography will provide you ideas for the best way to approach this. You may find that Duncan’s ritual analysis of museums is an appropriate model to use or you may find that it does not suit the particular museum you have selected. The Stuth article in the class bibliography exemplifies an approach taken by an architectural class – it obviously will not be entirely replicable for your project but it may may provide you with ideas. The Akcan article is another approach. In other words, there will be more than one way to do this; use your assigned readings and your own exploration of additional readings and real museums to determine your approach.

Once you have decided on your museum, you should consider the museum to be a client that has engaged you to provide this biography and analysis of future directions. Write a letter to the museum director with your project proposal. Justify your decision to choose this museum and indicate your desire to provide the museum with a proposal for directions in the next decade. Although you do not have to spell out these suggestions at this point, you might find it helpful to provide either a skeleton of what you envision or a reason for believing that some changes will be necessary. Include a list of references you plan to use and ideas you have for additional data gathering. This letter will constitute your project proposal and will be shared with the class. The proposal letter will be graded separately from the total project.

The final project should be prepared in written form with graphics. It should look like something you would be willing to share with a museum administrator in real life. You should also prepare a power point version of your written presentation. You will present the power point to the class and turn in the written version for grading. The length of the paper should be approximately 2500 words (about 10 pages); the presentation should be 12 - 15 minutes, it should be formal, but it should not be read directly from your paper.

**Rubric for term project**

(superlative) project meets requirements for length and content, and demonstrates high level of quality in concern for writing, organization and overall project; presentation version shows serious (professional level) concern and commitment to project

(good; better than average) project meets requirements at an acceptable level but overall project lacks evidence (frisson) of having gone beyond the readily available material and/or conclusions; the written version may be excellent but the presentation did not appear to polished or practiced (this is not the same thing as being nervous!)

(Acceptably decent) Project is missing historically relevant material or fails to demonstrate personal initiative in going beyond the provision of a summary of historical materials; all components are otherwise included and competent

(unacceptable college work) project is turned in but is incomplete in terms of content, approach to theme, and submitted components

270 - 300

240 - 270

210 - 240

200


Duncan, Carol and Alan Wallach. "The Universal Survey Museum." Art History 3, no. 4 (1980): 448-469. (attachment included in Refworks)


