Toward a Dynamic and Communicative Art History: Reflections on Classroom Interactions in a Western Art Survey Course

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Received: May 5, 2025 Accepted: June 13, 2025 Published: September 30, 2025

To cite this article: SONG Fang. (2025). Toward a Dynamic and Communicative Art History: Reflections on Classroom Interactions in a Western Art Survey Course. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 145-150, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.016

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.016

Abstract: This is a review of classroom interactions in the spring semester of the Introduction to Western Art History course. Given the extensive content coverage and tight schedule, as well as the experimental nature of the course, adjustments are made every year. To encourage students' participation and promote exchange of ideas, this year's lesson planning incorporated more interactive elements, which in retrospect can be categorized into four types: impromptu Q&A, preview-based checks, student-generated questions, and collaborative artwork analysis. Each interaction method is demonstrated with specific examples. Overall, these initiatives successfully encouraged student engagement and created a more dynamic classroom atmosphere, though there remains significant room for further improvement.

Keywords: classroom interaction; Western Art History

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In this age of information overload, knowledge appears readily accessible, yet both students and teachers often feel overwhelmed. This is particularly true for my elective course, Introduction to Western Art History. Designed as a semester-long course, it comprises just 24 contact hours (16 sessions of 90 minutes each) yet must address 30, 000 years of artistic production—from prehistoric cave paintings to contemporary works. After teaching it several times while striving to cover vast material, I concluded that the course's focus should shift from sheer content coverage to nurturing curiosity, open-mindedness, and observational and critical thinking skills. This pedagogical shift aligns with core principles of constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through experience and social discourse, rather than passively received (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). Ultimately, what matters most is the authentic dialogue between

teacher and students, who become fellow travelers in exploring art.

1. Modes of Classroom Interaction

This semester, I prioritized idea exchange and deliberately integrated structured classroom interactions into lesson plans (previously, these had been more spontaneous than intentional). Reflecting on this shift, I identify four distinct modes of interaction employed so far:

1.1 Impromptu Question and Answer

This type of interaction is the most frequently used. The term "impromptu" applies only to the students, as they do not need to prepare in advance. Questions arise spontaneously when specific artworks are introduced, and students are typically asked to share their immediate reactions. This method effectively engages students and sharpens their observational skills.

For example, during a discussion of late-Gothic and early-Renaissance Italian paintings, students were asked to compare three works on the same subject: *Virgin and Child* (*Madonna Enthroned*) by Duccio, Cimabue, and Giotto. These works are now displayed together in the Uffizi Museum, offering a unique opportunity to examine the artists' styles side by side. Students first viewed slides of the paintings and shared their general impressions, selecting the one they resonated with most. A few were then asked to explain their choices. Interestingly, several favored Duccio's version due to its frame, while none initially chose Cimabue's work—a result that surprised me. However, when the comparison deepened—focusing on details such as the portrayal of the Madonna and the vividness of the Christ child—most students revised their opinions, with Cimabue's Christ child ultimately receiving the most votes.

This exercise both puzzled and challenged the students. It transcended mere teacher-student interaction, becoming a dialogue between viewers and artists. In summary, it highlighted three key points: 1) the necessity of careful observation when analyzing art; 2) the inherent unreliability of first impressions; 3) the fluidity of artistic perception, which shifts with context, perspective, and personal experience. Even through slides, the activity underscored the dynamic nature of artistic appreciation.

1.2 Preview-Based Checks

Students are assigned preparatory materials to review before class. During the lecture, the teacher poses questions to verify their engagement with the preview. However, the primary purpose is not assessment but rather to provide essential background knowledge. These checks are woven into the lesson as introductions or transitional segments.

Example 1:

Prior to a lecture on ancient Roman art, students were assigned to read "An Outline of Roman History" (p. 159, *Art Through the Ages*) to familiarize themselves with major historical periods and key emperors—knowledge crucial for understanding stylistic developments. While the act of previewing alone would suffice, a brief interactive review was incorporated to reinforce accountability. A three-slide activity was designed. On the first two slides were images of the Colosseum and Pantheon, each paired with portraits of three emperors.

Students guessed under whose reign each building was constructed. On the third slide was an equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius alongside three portrait busts of different emperors, and students identified the statue's subject. This lighthearted "check" served as an engaging introduction to Roman architecture and sculpture, making the distant historical period more approachable.

Example 2:

Before discussing Gothic architecture, students were asked to preview an illustrated diagram of a Gothic cathedral (p. 347, *Art Through the Ages*), focusing on key terminology. This preparatory work served as an essential foundation for even preliminary engagement with Gothic architecture. Given the challenging nature of the material, the subsequent knowledge verification was intentionally conducted in a lighthearted manner.

To bridge the transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture seamlessly, the session commenced with a brief recap of characteristic Romanesque features. Students examined several Romanesque structures not previously covered, comparing their distinctive barrel vaults against prototypical Gothic vault designs. The "checking" then focused on just three critical exterior elements—rib vaulting, pointed arches, and flying buttresses—which collectively embody the fundamental distinctions between Gothic and Romanesque architecture. Students worked from labeled illustrations, simply matching terms to visual components. Later, when examining interior features, two additional terms were similarly verified. These deliberately low-pressure preview-check exercises proved effective in demystifying complex architectural concepts for students.

1.3 Student-Generated Questions

Students receive advance notice (typically one week) of upcoming lecture topics and are encouraged to formulate questions about aspects they find either perplexing or intriguing. The intentional choice of the terms "perplexing" and "intriguing" serves to engage students emotionally, thereby stimulating active critical thinking and deeper intellectual curiosity.

For example, prior to a lecture on early 20th-century paintings, students were introduced to eight major artistic movements (commonly referred to as "isms") and their representative works. Each student was tasked with preparing one question about a topic that personally captured their interest. During the class discussion on Fauvism, I began by sharing a reflection from Henri Matisse: "My choice of colors does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences …" (Kleiner, 2010) This quotation immediately resonated with the students, particularly SLDW, who observed that it directly addressed his pre-prepared question regarding the seemingly arbitrary use of color in André Derain's *Charing Cross Bridge*.

The discussion quickly gained momentum. JTZ contributed an engaging anecdote about Derain improvising with his fingers to create a work when he found himself without brushes. TYQ raised a perceptive question that explored the distinctions between Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, prompting a thoughtful exchange among the class. Meanwhile, TZCY offered an original hypothesis, suggesting that Fauvism's eventual decline may have been influenced by the artists' own unease with the intensity of their vibrant color palettes.

This type of interaction presents a unique pedagogical challenge, as the teacher cannot anticipate students' questions prior to class. While advance knowledge of these questions might seem advantageous, it would fundamentally compromise the dynamic spontaneity that makes this exercise valuable. In such situations, maintaining an open-minded approach and employing appropriate humor prove essential for fostering a productive

learning environment.

When fielding student questions, the instructor has several strategic options: she may first invite classmates to attempt an answer, thereby encouraging peer-to-peer learning; alternatively, if students appear uncertain, she can provide her own response directly. Particularly complex questions that defy immediate resolution may be respectfully deferred for subsequent research and future discussion. For instance, when student LP raised the profound question regarding "the standard of art," the most productive approach proved to be eliciting multiple student perspectives before eventually contributing the instructor's viewpoint. This sequencing not only validates student participation but often yields more nuanced understandings through collective exploration.

1.4 Collaborative Artwork Analysis

Expanding Method 3's approach, this variant shifts the focus from student questions to personal commentary on self-selected artworks. This approach proves particularly effective when addressing well-known subjects—such as the Renaissance Trinity or the Impressionist movement—where students' prior familiarity enables them to contribute meaningful perspectives. Such conventional topics, when reexamined through students' fresh viewpoints, often yield unexpectedly vibrant discussions that benefit both learners and instructors alike.

In preparation for our Impressionism lecture, I tasked students with selecting one work about which they wished to share their opinions, whether laudatory or critical. Following established art historical conventions while incorporating my own curatorial judgment, I assembled comprehensive slide materials featuring major artists and their representative works. The session unfolded organically: before delving into formal analysis of each painter's oeuvre, I invited students who had chosen relevant works to initiate the discussion.

The lesson commenced with an overview of the Barbizon School as the precursor movement before addressing the etymological origins of "Impressionism"—a term coined from a critic's disparaging remark about Monet's 1872 *Impression: Sunrise*. Student HTJ immediately volunteered her interpretation of this seminal work, perceiving in its hazy harbor scene a radiant symbol of hope, a visual embodiment of dawn's crisp vitality. This observation naturally segued into an examination of Monet's distinctive palette, particularly evident in his 1867 *The Beach at Saint-Adresse*. To demonstrate the artist's relentless pursuit of chromatic nuance, I presented his 1879 *Camille Monet on Her Deathbed*, contextualizing the work with his own words about being "…impelled by instinct to paint and nothing but" (Walther, 2013).

While my initial lesson plan had scheduled Monet for later discussion (*Impression: Sunrise* having been shown merely to explain the term's origin), this student-driven commentary prompted a more fluid progression. After this detour, we returned to examine Manet's crucial role in transitioning from Realism to Impressionism. The discussion continued dynamically as student YLJ analyzed Manet's 1866 *A Young Lady*, drawing connections to the same model featured in his more controversial 1863 works *Olympia* and *Luncheon on the Grass*. The latter painting provoked critical remarks from TYQ, who found its coloration conspicuously unnatural—an observation that fortuitously enabled a comparative analysis with Monet's treatment of similar pastoral themes, for which I had prepared illustrative slides.

Remarkably, this apparently improvisational approach to art historical discussion mirrored the very qualities that define Impressionist aesthetics—the spontaneous brushwork, the embrace of contingency, and the celebration of perceptual immediacy that characterized fin-de-siècle French art. For me as an educator, this session

transcended mere pedagogy to become what I can only describe as a genuinely serendipitous intellectual encounter—an experience I believe resonated equally with my students.

2. Key Insights

Upon reflection, the most impactful lessons from the past semester were undeniably those that fostered meaningful classroom interactions. These sessions stood out for two key reasons. First, they were characterized by a remarkable spontaneity that proved essential for both artistic creation and appreciation. Each of the interaction methods I employed—whether impromptu discussions, preview-based checks, student-generated questions, or collaborative artwork analysis— incorporated an inherent element of unpredictability. This openness to unplanned outcomes created an authentic dialogue that mirrored real-world artistic discourse, where interpretations are never predetermined but emerge through genuine exchange.

Second, these interactive sessions forged deeper connections between artists, their works, and contemporary viewers. As Shen Yuan (2022) eloquently observes, "Art is a container that carries human perception, and humans use art to express their feelings about the world." (藝術是承載人類感知力的容器,人類用藝術來表達對於世界的感受。) This perspective resonates profoundly with my teaching experience. Artworks serve not merely as vessels of their creators' emotions, but also as mediums through which viewers—separated by time or space—can communicate. The classroom becomes a dynamic space where these multiple dialogues intersect: between artist and student, between teacher and learner, and among students themselves as they share diverse interpretations of the same work.

A particularly revealing example was our discussion of Monet's *Impression: Sunrise*. Once a painting I had regarded as overly familiar through its celebrity status, the work took on new vitality through students' responses. HTJ's interpretation infused the harbor scene with the optimism of a new dawn, while LYQ analyzed its formal qualities, noting the interplay of warm and cool hues and the composition's geometric balance. DZCY's observation about the rising sun's movement and LCK's technical appreciation of Monet's deceptively simple technique all contributed to a collective reappraisal. What I had previously considered "humdrum" became newly remarkable, forever transformed by these fresh perspectives. This phenomenon—where student insights renew my own understanding of canonical works—has become a recurring and cherished aspect of teaching art history, ensuring that the course content remains vibrant and evolving.

3. Future Directions

While the current classroom interactions have proven beneficial and inspiring, significant improvements can still be made.

First, avoid perfunctory discussions. For topics that clearly engage students, invite broader participation rather than limiting contributions to one or two individuals. Balance is key: avoid rushing through topics, but also refrain from excessive dwell time on any single artwork (though this has not yet been an issue, it merits vigilance). To foster deeper dialogue, prioritize open-ended questions that encourage independent thinking before guiding the conversation toward key themes.

Second, adopt stricter selectivity in lesson planning. From weeks nine to twelve (covering the Early Renaissance through the mid-19th century—a span including the High Renaissance, Baroque movements, Rococo, Romanticism and Realism, among others), structured interactions declined, leaving little room for discussion amid dense content coverage. As an introductory Western art course aimed at establishing a foundational framework, it demands judicious curation of artworks. Hippocrates' adage "Art is long, life is short" and Zhuangzi's reflection "My life has limits, but knowledge is boundless" (吾生也有涯,而知也無涯) resonate here: artworks are infinite, but class time is not. Greater subtraction is necessary—not just to streamline content, but to create space for critical observation, reflection, and dialogue.

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(Editors: LI Ruobing & Bonnie WANG)