



## Storytelling, Spoon-Feeding, and Traditions: Teaching Art History Better

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### Author Biography

Gay Sweely, faculty emeritus, is a professor in the Department of Art & Design at Eastern Kentucky University; her specialties are 19<sup>th</sup>-century, Non-western, and American art history. She served the Student Success Institute, the McNair Program, and team-taught five different courses for the ECU Honors Program (15 years), as well as mentoring 19 students across campus. A native of Chicago, she graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University, University of Utah, Canterbury University (NZ), and a double PhD from the University of Melbourne (AUST). She is the former president of Chapter 122, Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, and co-editor/author of *Becoming Australians* (2001). Dr. Sweely has been presenting academic papers, publishing since 1976 in five countries, and teaching in three. Her current publications concern teaching art history and graphic arts, and her current research concerns the history and preservation of a 1970 stone “mansion” in Madison County, Kentucky.

# 2019 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## Storytelling, Spoon-Feeding, and Traditions: Teaching Art History Better

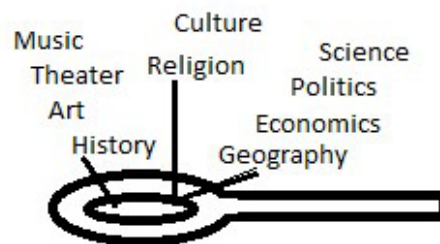
**Gay Sweely**

Eastern Kentucky University

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*As an art historian, it is increasingly hard to teach art history to students who have no background or interest in history. This paper definitely does not criticize my university or my state's educational practices, but I believe that teaching history is very important to all of our students as citizens. I was educated in, have taught in three countries, and have published in four countries. That said, in the past 20 years, it has become more and more difficult to teach the history of art, artists, and stylistic movements. Why? The majority of my students lack any background or knowledge concerning basic history, culture, and traditions. So, how do we, as educators, overcome this lack of knowledge, and what can we do about this deficiency – or should we do anything about this at all? Should we be concerned? Is art history (and maybe other subjects in the humanities) doomed in the future? What can be done about this, and can any of these remedies be transparent in the course of our teaching? Solutions to these problems that I have effectively employed involve storytelling, spoon-feeding, and explaining traditions, and these solutions have been extremely successful!*

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### Introduction

Spoon-feeding in education has a very bad press. I have taught art history in three countries in the past 39 years at the college level; art history is not a subject generally taught in elementary or high school; thus, students in my courses have very little background concerning the subject matter. Ever since I can remember, I always wanted to teach art history – at age 4, age 13, and beyond. However, I also have served as a technical editor and writer in jobs before teaching in college. In one of my jobs (at IBM), I was a “word smith,” writing technical manuals for helicopter pilots. Thus, I am used to learning as much as I can from technical sources (and experts) in order to explain procedures and information better to others, whether they be pilots,

mechanics, the general public, or students. This idea of explaining information better is the purpose of this paper. How can I better teach subjects when students do not have prior knowledge about the content?

## **The problem**

In the past 19 years at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), I have noticed that fewer and fewer students know the basics of history and geography. Yes, I teach art history (which most of my students have never heard of, but they take my courses because they have heard that I am “nice.”) Additionally, they seem to be unaware of traditions (religious or cultural), mythology, music (except of their own generation), movies, theater, books, literature, poetry, dates and eras, and the list goes on. I really have a lot of trouble teaching art history – nobody cares – why? And, as aside here: many people I encounter daily (like my eye doctor, my GP doctor, my accountant, etc.) either absolutely loved art history or hated it (because it involved history, biographies, dates, people, odd sounding names, memorization, geography, geology, long essays, and many tests). By the way, this is not a paper for art historians only; some of what I am saying here may resound in other fields of teaching too, such as law, literature, comparative religions, anthropology, or even science, etc.

## **We are All Having Problems Teaching Humanities Courses! What Can We Do?**

So, as educators, what can we do about this? I primarily teach art history, and you have to have a good grasp of history, religion, culture, politics, wars, important people, science, art, and geography (maps) in each class in order to create a story or foundation for the artworks, artists, and the artistic periods. The problems that I have encountered are numerous, especially concerning the first 10 minutes of each class when I give a brief summary of the historical period that we will be discussing that day; in short, the students have absolutely no understanding of what I am presenting, especially since they have not read the assignment beforehand. To better appreciate my concerns, you have to know that I teach courses in Art Appreciation, Global Art History, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art History, American Art History, Western Art History, Non-Western Art History, the History of Graphic Arts, Asian-Pacific-Rim Art History, as well as American and Australian History. The following chart gives you a fair idea of the questions and difficulties that I grapple with in my courses each semester.

## Some Questions Affecting My Teaching

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the Byzantine Empire? What's an icon?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did Columbus land in North America? Hispaniola? West Indies?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When did Rome fall and why? Where is Ravenna, and why is it important?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long did the Revolutionary War last? 1776 - to what year?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's the difference between the Dark Ages, the Medieval Era, and the Middle Ages? Why is this important?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who helped to bring about the Renaissance? When was it? What was it a rebirth of? Why is this important?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the date of the Mayflower arrival, and when did the first Africans arrive?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where was the Lost Colony and where was it? Why is Jamestown important? Why was this important in American history/art history?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is Mannerism? I have never heard of it - is it important?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who cares that the 19<sup>th</sup> century had many "isms," and what were they?</li> </ul>

## Major Problems Professors/Teachers Encounter:

- Dates and events worldwide
- Knowledge of geography
- Basic understanding of pronunciation (languages?)
- Basic knowledge of history and names of important people
- Cultural traditions and norms of society
- An understanding of art appreciation and an aesthetic understanding of human history (throughout the ages)
- Lastly ... an interest in anything cultural! (rather than their phones)

## Getting Students Excited – Is It Possible?

While teaching at ECU, I have tried to make my courses better and better each year. But, I find it harder and harder to reach the students and get them excited or involved in each lecture – there is a lot of apathy out there, and most of my students don't want to talk (are they afraid of giving an incorrect answer – what are they afraid of in all of our courses?). So, two years ago (after teaching some new methods for 37 years), I tried out many visual things, and it is these “things” that I want to present to you in this paper.

YouTube: *Mona Lisa's Smile* - Second Lesson “It's Art!” 2:47

## **How Can You Improve Your Teaching?**

Make sure you do more storytelling, spoon-feeding history, and discussing global cultural traditions (plus more timelines, geography, maps, and YouTube selections in the beginning of each class – to “set the table”). Simply stated, if they don’t know it, and if they are not going to read about it – “KISS” (keep it simple stupid) – plan to teach or tell them more!!! If they don’t know it – make sure that they learn it from you!

### **Storytelling**

Oral traditions are very important to Native American cultures. Certain arts are passed down to each generation in a regulated manner. Storytelling is often used as a teaching tool to instill the next generation with traditional cultural values and beliefs. The importance of the oral tradition is evident in Native American storyteller figurines. Become a storyteller! (Picotte, 2018).

### **Spoon-Feeding Information at the College Level**

For this paper, these are ideas that I do not agree with concerning the following comments: Are there limitations to spoon-feeding? Many websites profess that spoon-feeding high school students is bad (Morris, 2016). I disagree – in college courses, if you do not spoon-feed history, dates, timelines, geography, and culture – you will lose many of your students!

- Spoon feeding does not stimulate active participation from the students and only fosters rote learning. (I disagree – if you do not offer them the information and sources, they will not know what you are talking about.)
- Spoon feeding does not promote independent learning and creativity. (In college, I am not especially interested in creativity; I am interested in the students learning and gaining an appreciation of the art historical information.)
- Students lack initiative and problem-solving skills because they have not been trained to search for data by themselves. (If the students have not been “trained” [by you] to search for the data, then you have not provided them with the skills during the first classes of each course. This is your job.)

### **Give Students the Backstory**

The Miriam-Webster dictionary states that a backstory is “a story that tells what led up to the main story or plot (as of a film).” (Backstory, n.d.). As an art historian, the backstory allows me to give a wealth of information (not provided in the textbooks that many students do not read even if they ever bought the textbook) that helps the students to understand and appreciate each artwork better for the era, culture, or artistic period. (Eltham & Arvantakis, 2018). It is through stories that we actually

learn and remember information better, such as the renowned stories around the campfire in ancient (prehistoric human) times around the world (Balter, 2014, p. 25).

For my presentation at the 2019 ECU Pedagogicon Conference, I introduced a number of artworks that could be offered and examined in our courses in art history on campus. Unfortunately, a number of professors simply name these artworks, dates, and brief histories, but they may fail to give their full backstories. Most importantly, it is the backstories that will excite the students, and they will remember these stories, as well as implanting information concerning the artworks, dates, artists, and histories in their memories “forever” (at least until the next semester). For this presentation, I was able to examine each of these favorite artworks in detail, but I list them here for your further consideration. All of these artworks have inspiring backstories that the students love in all of the courses I teach in art history and history, remembering that I teach both Non-Western and Western art history courses – throughout the ages.

### Some Interesting Artworks to Consider

Artwork, Artist, Date	Annotation
Jean Broc, <i>The Death of Hyacinth in the Arms of Apollo</i> , 1801.	Relationships, love; discuss death, winds, and the hyacinth flower.
Co-conspirators of Lincoln’s Assassination Hanged, July 7, 1865. Photograph by Alexander Gardner/Library of Congress.	Shocking photograph from the end of the Civil War era that needs an explanation on many levels – history and early photography.
Charmaine Pwerle, <i>Sand Hills</i> , Australia, n.d.	A truly unique depiction of the Australian landscape by an Aboriginal artist.
Ebola virus graphic, May 2019 issue of the <i>National Geographic</i> .	Microscope image – deadly – but it also resembles Australian paintings.
A Neanderthal painting? <i>Smithsonian</i> , May 2019.	Discussion: who thought that Neanderthals ever painted or had art?
Archille Gorky, <i>The Liver Is the Cock’s Comb</i> , 1944.	Title is unnerving as is the “melting” artwork and the artist’s history.
Piet Mondrian, <i>Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow</i> , 1930.	The artist in Europe prior to WW II – rigid – no exact title. Discuss earlier abstract trees.
Piet Mondrian, <i>Broadway Boogie Woogie</i> , 1942-43.	The artist flees to New York (falls in love with the city) – full title and street energy.
Bronzino, <i>Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time (Allegory of Lust)</i> , c. 1540-45.	Mannerist artist with a serious message for his friends to watch out for their morals.

Artwork, Artist, Date	Annotation
Jan van Eyck, <i>The Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife</i> , 1434.	A whole lecture on the symbolism and story here; make sure you cover everything.
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, <i>Hunters in the Snow</i> , 1565.	A lecture on the symbolism and story here; make sure you cover the activities, people, and symbols in every quadrant.
The statue of <i>Laocoön and His Sons</i> , also called the Laocoön Group, excavated in Rome in 1506.	The highly emotional Hellenistic statue affected many later works of art with its gripping tale.
Prehistoric markings (art?).	Think past representational cave art to the “markings” by prehistoric peoples in caves all over the globe – what do they represent?
Wandjina, Australia.	Very spooky cave artworks; tell the story – connect to the Northern Territory and, of course, the Scream movies!
Benjamin West, <i>The Death of General Wolfe</i> , c. 1770.	An extremely good example of history painting in the latter portion of the 18th century with a lot of empathy and meaning.
A waterworn pebble resembling a human face, from Makapansgat, South Africa, c. 3,000,000 BCE.	A manuport that a distant relative of modern humans may lead us to reconsider aesthetic thinking in hominids.
<i>Madonna and Child</i> from Santa Maria Nova, c. 500 – 525.	Byzantine icon. Why does this painting look so bad – were they bad artists?
Lewis Hine, <i>Cotton-mill worker</i> , NC, gelatin-silver print photograph, 1908.	An unnerving image of a young girl working: an important Congressional case.
Paul Delaroche, <i>The Execution of Lady Jane Grey</i> , 1833.	An unnerving image: tell the whole story, the Tower of London, and her plight.
Hieronymus Bosch, <i>The Garden of Earthly Delights</i> , 1480.	Could spend hours on these three panels: students are unnerved by the images.
Albrecht Dürer, <i>The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)</i> , 1504.	First nudes since Roman era; include discussion of printing images here.
Georges Seurat, <i>Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte</i> , 1882-84.	My favorite painting forever; discuss the optic science here, the numerous preliminary drawings, and the many artistic changes made.



## **Discuss Global Cultural Traditions**

As American families around the country gather to celebrate Thanksgiving, eat turkey, and perhaps partake in some Black Friday shopping, they might be surprised to learn how much we don't really know about the holiday origins of Thanksgiving (as presented in my American art history course, confirmed by our founding father, President George Washington). What we do know is that most of the adult colonists in attendance were men [many of the women had already died], and they were outnumbered by their Native guests. "For the English, before and after every meal there was a prayer of thanksgiving." "...native people [traditionally] have thanksgivings as a daily, ongoing thing." The first observance was not called "Thanksgiving"; it was simply a harvest celebration (Pruitt, 2018).

Jennie Augusta Brownscombe, *The First Thanksgiving*, 1914 (Munger, 2015).

## **Add Gobs of Maps (and Timelines) in Each and Every Class**

When discussing the numerous maps that I offer in each class, I found out that students "love" animated or interactive maps the best. There are many on YouTube to offer in your classes, such as the retreat of the Ice Age, the rise of the Roman Empire, the growth of the Byzantine Empire, or the "World Mercator Projection with country going to true size (0:07)." (World Mercator Projection, 2018). Recently, I developed an entire class unit on the history of maps from ancient times to the discovery (rediscovery) of America, New Zealand, and Australia. (In New Zealand, they are not fond of being called "Down Under," so they have constructed a new map with New Zealand at the top of the globe, with Australia – nearby above to the left.) I lived "Down Under" or "Up Down" for nearly 15 years of my life, and my all-time favorite map is "The Known Globe (Nieuwe Werelt Kaert), 1666-67; it maps out only a shell outline of Australia-to-be and no New Zealand landmass at all. (Goos, n.d.). So much for the record of exploration history!

## **YouTube Selections**

Again, I use one or two YouTube selections before each class to add context, history, and visual information – and to enhance further class discussions. The following YouTube selections are some of my favorites, and they show the variety of additional information that I try to include in each class, whether it be Art Appreciation, Global Art History, Arts of the Pacific Region, the History of Graphic Arts, 19th-Century Art History, Non-Western Art History, or American Art History. For each course, I have a separate notebook that lists the YouTube selections for that particular day and the title of the YouTube video in quotes (and the time record of each video). Of course, the "trick" here is to open and stack up these YouTube video selections before each class so that you can use them after your initial class introduction and before your teaching session. Note that I do not use all of the YouTube videos at the

beginning of each class; I often interrupt each class session with one or two YouTube videos during each class at the proper time concerning the subject matter in discussion. (By the way, some of these YouTube videos may be for children or high-school-age students, but they actually go over really well with all college-age students – they laugh, giggle, and enjoy them all. Additionally, my students love, love cartoons on any of the historical topics, such as the ball court cartoon from Eldorado – when teaching Central American art history (just remember to use the software to remove the ads.) The following YouTube offerings represent initial selections from some of the various courses that I teach at ECU.

### **Some of My Favorite YouTube Selections to Incorporate in Classes**

**YouTube:** “Human Prehistory 101 (Part 1 of 3): Out of (Eastern) Africa” ... 5:34.

**YouTube:** “Thanksgiving for Kids: The History of the First Thanksgiving” ... 5:59.

**YouTube:** “The Countries of the World Song: Oceania” ... 2:31.

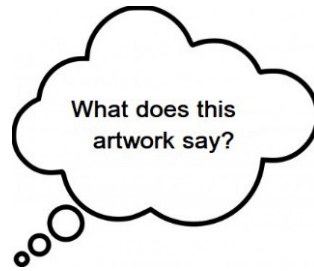
**YouTube:** “Panorama of Moving Sidewalk, Paris Expo 1900” ... 1:32.

**YouTube:** “Gertie the Dinosaur, 1914” ... 5:47.

**YouTube:** “Notre Dame Spire Collapses in Paris Cathedral Fire” ... 0:49 – recent!

So, against all negative opinions concerning spoon feeding (mostly at the high-school level in the arts and humanities), I offer many artworks where I actually spoon-feed history and information to my students so that they can all grasp the important elements in each of my lectures, rather than just clicking from one art image to another. Thus, I make sure that I “sort of” spoon feed and offer an extra amount of descriptive information on all of the artworks shown in every class. Moreover, I make sure that my students are free to comment on these images when they are all presented – that is the best part of each class! (P.S. Sometimes – or many times – we get “off topic,” but these are the best class discussions ever, and this discussion energizes all of the students.)

In short, I have to do a lot of extra work and research beforehand to lay out each class with additional information and fun facts, such as why do brides carry bouquets, why does it rains cats and dogs, and the neat story of throwing the baby out with the bath water (Herman, 2014). As each class starts, I put up timelines, maps, and YouTube videos, and then I lead into an extremely solid 10-minute historical introduction of the material to be presented that day (in order to make each day’s presentation relevant). It is only then that I can begin to teach what the textbook covers – art and art history – because it is only then that I am certain that every student is not only on a solid playing field – but also on the same “page” – in all areas addressed during that particular class time.



## Final Thoughts

The purpose of this paper is to tell you what I recently did (in the past two years) that has turned all my regular art history courses into “super courses.” Just go beyond what may be expected of you as a teacher, lecturer, or professor by adding extra research, histories, maps, fun facts, visual aids, and YouTube videos, etc. I promise you that your students will learn a lot and appreciate and understand your classes a great deal better. If you teach art history or any other course on campus, remember that you cannot hold your students’ attention the full class time unless you mix up your presentations with a number of varied visual experiences. They will all learn better because of your additional personal efforts. Expand your courses to go beyond teaching or lecturing – become a “super teacher” of information – your students demand that of you! Of import, you will be giving them something very special, and you will engender far better discussions in each of your classes – I promise!

**Remember:** Tell Many Stories, Spoon-Feed History, and Explain Traditions!

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