

# *Philosophy@TheVirtual Art Museum*

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Each year, the culmination of our course introducing the second graders from the Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School of Excellence in Springfield, MA, to philosophy is their trip to Mount Holyoke College for a tour of the campus and a "graduation ceremony." Their visit to the Art Museum is always the highlight of their campus tour. Many of the children have never been to an art museum and they are fascinated by all the different types of works they see on the walls and on the floor at the museum. Art proves to be something they relate to with a great deal of interest and excitement.

While taking the "young scholars" on short tours of the Museum a number of years ago, I realized that we could continue our philosophy lessons by using as the prompts for discussions the paintings and sculptures that fascinated the children. This way, their visit to the museum would not just be a fun outing but at the same time a significant educational experience. Since the vast majority of the children with whom we work from the MLK School come from disadvantaged backgrounds, this was an important opportunity for them to engage with actual works of art and to learn that they could think about art in much the same way that they had begun thinking about the picture books we used in our classroom to stimulate our philosophy discussions.

Since some readers may not be familiar with the method that we use to teach elementary school children philosophy, I'll give a quick summary. We don't give them watered-down lectures on topics such as the problem of evil or Descartes' argument for skepticism in the first Meditation as some of my own students had anticipated. Our goal is for them to engage in the actual activity of philosophizing: that is, thinking deeply about abstract issues, articulating their positions in regard to them, supporting those positions with sound reasons, and confronting opposing views with objections. To get this to happen, we begin by reading the students a picture book and then posing a philosophical question raised by the book. To begin a discussion of metaphysics, say we read *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, in which certain objects like an apple or a spoon are paired with a short list of their properties.

The book states that one of an apple's properties - being round, for example - is "the important thing" about that object. We then ask the children whether they agree... In the ensuing discussion, we encourage children to disagree with the book and each other, always asking them to provide a reason for their response. I recall a young student shaking his head and saying, "Round, that's not what makes something an apple. Apples aren't round" -- meaning they weren't spherical, which is, of course, true. In this way, children begin to engage in a philosophical discussion about the concept of essential properties. They are learning to Say what they think, to Listen carefully to their classmates, to Agree or disagree with the book and their classmates, and to say Why they think what they think: the SLAW method.

At around the same time that these visits to the Mount Holyoke Museum of Art began, Remei Capdevila, then the Education Director at El Museo del Barrio in Harlem, contacted me about the developing a philosophy program for their school age visitors. I was very excited at this prospect because it promised to wed my interest in the philosophy of art with my work with young people while also expanding the age range of the pre-college students I worked with to include those of high school age.

When I visited El Museo to start developing this program, I was surprised to discover that the museum did not have a permanent collection on display. As a result, I was puzzled about how to create materials that would be of lasting value for the museum. If I tailored my workshops and lessons to works of art that would soon no longer be exhibited, my efforts would soon be dated and no longer useful as a way of encouraging philosophical discussions with children and youths, since they would not be able to see the works upon which I had focused. I began to ponder the possibility of creating a virtual site, displayed on a monitor in the museum, that could be used for both training El Museo's staff and to facilitate philosophy discussions for visitors to the museum.

My interest in this project was also stimulated because I had begun to develop, together with the late Ann Musser, then the Director of Education at the Smith College Museum of Art, a method for using works of art to stimulate philosophical discussions when MLK students visited the Mount Holyoke Art Museum. Ann had realized that art could inspire the same philosophical discussions among the children that they were having in their classroom as they read picture books. For example, since we had used the Frog and Toad story “Dragons and Giants” to discuss the idea of courage with the children – asking them questions such as whether they agreed with Toad that brave people could never feel fear – she suggested that the children view a portrait by Nicolas de Largillière. The portrait is of the nobleman Charles Louis Remond wearing his armor, so it would be natural to ask the children if they thought he was brave and why. As in the story, the question of the difference between being brave and merely looking brave arose. In addition, the companion portrait of his wife, Marie Elisabeth Desiree de Chantemerle, arrayed in an elaborate gown and wrap, raised gender issues.

I hope this gives you some sense of the experiences and idea behind the Philosophy@The Virtual Art Museum website. (It’s easy to access via [museumphilosophy.com](http://museumphilosophy.com).) The website provides a resource for high school and even college students that enables them to discuss philosophical questions using works of art. The method of asking questions and having the students discuss them guided by a facilitator is the same as that we use with younger children and picture books. The biggest difference is that the older students first have to look very closely at the work or works that form the basis for the philosophy discussion. Only after spending some time looking closely at these works does the philosophy discussion proper begin.

How does the site actually work? Figure 1 is the homepage. As you will notice, there are six basic categories of works of art that are featured on the site: Portraits, Landscape, Expressionism, Abstract Art, Conceptual Art, and Photography. Obviously, this is a fairly arbitrary set of categories that doesn’t pretend to completeness. The categories reflect my interest in finding a variety of different types of art works that could be used to address a wide range of philosophical issues.

When you click on a category – such as Portraits (see figure 2) – the homepage for that unit appears, featuring a short description of that category of art work as well as the images that the unit employs. Although Portraits features four art works, all the other units have only three works. Most of the works on the site are well known although I have included some very interesting ones that are less widely known. A page dedicated to each of work helps students look carefully at the works and begin to think about their reactions to them by posing a series of questions about the work. In the case of the Portraits unit, the works are: “Portrait of Madame X” by John Singer Sargeant, “Woman with Hat” by Henri Matisse, “Michael Borges Study” by Kehinde Wiley, and “Self-Portrait” by Rembrandt van Rijn. (I should point out that the availability of images on museum websites for us to display them on this site. It would have not been possible only a few years ago due to copyright issues.) For each portrait, there are a list of questions that help the students look more carefully at the works than they otherwise might. For example, when the students look at the Wiley portrait, we begin by asking them to say what features of the work stand out. If one of them mentions that there is a difference between the realistic portrayal of the man and the cartoon-like flowers that surround him – clearly an important aspect of this work – we might ask them to say what they make of that difference. This is the sort of “follow up” that facilitators of our discussions need to be ready to pose in response to student comments.

Once the students have discussed all the paintings in the unit, it’s time to begin the philosophy discussion, if that hasn’t already happened. In the Portraits unit, our initial focus is on beauty. The idea is that the students’ examinations of the four works will have given them an experiential basis for thinking about the more abstract philosophical questions, such as whether a work of art, specifically a portrait, must be beautiful and whether the beauty of the work depends on its subject being beautiful. We included the Matisse portrait specifically to challenge the assumption that a beautiful portrait has to be of a beautiful person.

Although this example of a philosophical question is drawn from the philosophy of art/aesthetics, that is not always the case. Indeed, part of my goal is to show that works of art raise interesting questions from all the major areas of philosophy, from metaphysics to ethics. (I’ll give you some examples of that in a moment.) Figure 3 shows some of the philosophy questions generated for the Portraits unit. As you can see, the questions address issues in a range of different philosophical disciplines: aesthetics, philosophy of mind, existentialism, and ethics.

While the site can be used as it stands to generate philosophical discussions, it also functions as a model for teachers or parents interested in using works of art that they enjoy to discuss significant issues with their students or children. In fact, because the site is of necessity extremely limited in the types of works and the instances of each type that it can present, I hope that it encourages people to develop their own units following the model presented on the site. A teacher could have groups of students develop their own units for types of works not included on the site, for example, sculpture, performance art, or street art. The site is not meant to be definitive but suggestive, and also to serve as an aide for teachers not trained in leading philosophical discussions as they develop their facilitating skills.

I have had some interesting experience using the site in a number of different venues. The first was with a group of high school students in the Windsor High School in Windsor, CT. When the two teachers with whom I was working, Christine Onofrey and Sam Scheer, told me that there would be between 60 and 80 students at my presentation, I was taken aback. I normally work with much smaller groups of students, a maximum of around 20. But since I wanted to try out the site, I agreed. I was also a little worried when they told me that the period lasted for 90 minutes and began at 8 a.m. 90 minutes seemed like a long time for a discussion and I thought that the students – and I – would not be at our best at that early hour.

I was in for a real surprise. The high school students were really engaged once the discussion I facilitated about Expressionism, the unit the students chose to discuss, began. We first looked carefully at the three images: Van Gogh's Room, Munch's The Scream, and de Kooning's Woman V. The students talked about what they found intriguing and puzzled about the works, for example, the unnatural colors and the distorted objects depicted. When we began talking more philosophically, our discussion of emotions was extremely interesting; the students debated the difference was between a feeling and an emotion. One boy, who initially seemed quite alienated from the whole idea of engaging in a philosophy discussion, became very involved as he argued that people's mental lives were completely determined by physical causes, a position that other students disagreed with quite vehemently. This was a direction for the philosophical discussion I hadn't anticipated but that clearly engaged the students.

When Sam came up to me and told me that I only had 10 minutes left in the period, I was taken aback. The students were so involved in our philosophical discussion of the emotions that I had completely lost track of the time, something that rarely happens to me when I'm teaching. Their engagement with the site and the issues it raises was both inspiring and gratifying. At the end of the session, one of the students came up to me to say that she couldn't believe that she found philosophy so interesting, but that it was seeing how art raised philosophical questions that really intrigued her and she was now planning on studying more philosophy.

Since then, I have mostly presented the website to groups of teachers for whom I have been doing a workshop. At the workshop at Kinderphilosophie in Munich, Germany, the teachers and facilitators suggested that the site would be more useful to them if it were available in German. The site now exists in German, Spanish, French, and Chinese versions. In Sydney, Australia, where I did a workshop for the New South Wales Philosophy in Schools Association, we discussed Abstract Art. I was surprised to find a great deal of hostility to abstraction among the teachers and realized that the site also has an important educative function about the nature of at least some relatively contemporary art. And some of my colleagues at PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization) have reported excellent results using the site with their students.

In acquainting you with the site, I'm not just reporting on what I have done. I want to encourage you to think about using the images on the site as a way of introducing your college students to philosophical issues. My experience with pre-college philosophy has taught me that students of all ages will benefit from beginning their inquiries into abstract issues with "learner friendly" lessons in which they do not have to confront difficult texts and arguments. I'm hoping that members of the ASA will find this website useful in their classes.

Let me conclude by expressing my gratitude for the assistance of all the people who collaborated with me in developing the site. Its development made possible by grants from Mount Holyoke College that allowed me to employ students both to create the site and to develop its French, Spanish, and Chinese versions. The German translation was done by Sabina Hüttinger and Karoline Wodara of Kinderphilosophie. My two student assistants, Emma Kennedy and Emily Lankiewicz, created the actual site under the supervision of the wonderful LITS advisors Amber Welch and Chrissa Lindahl. Without the generosity and insight of all of them, Philosophy@The Virtual Art Museum would have never have transitioned from fantasy into virtual reality. The site is now accessible for free under a Creative Commons license for one and all. And while I'm thanking people, thanks to David Goldblatt and Shelby Moser for their interest in publishing this introduction to the website.

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