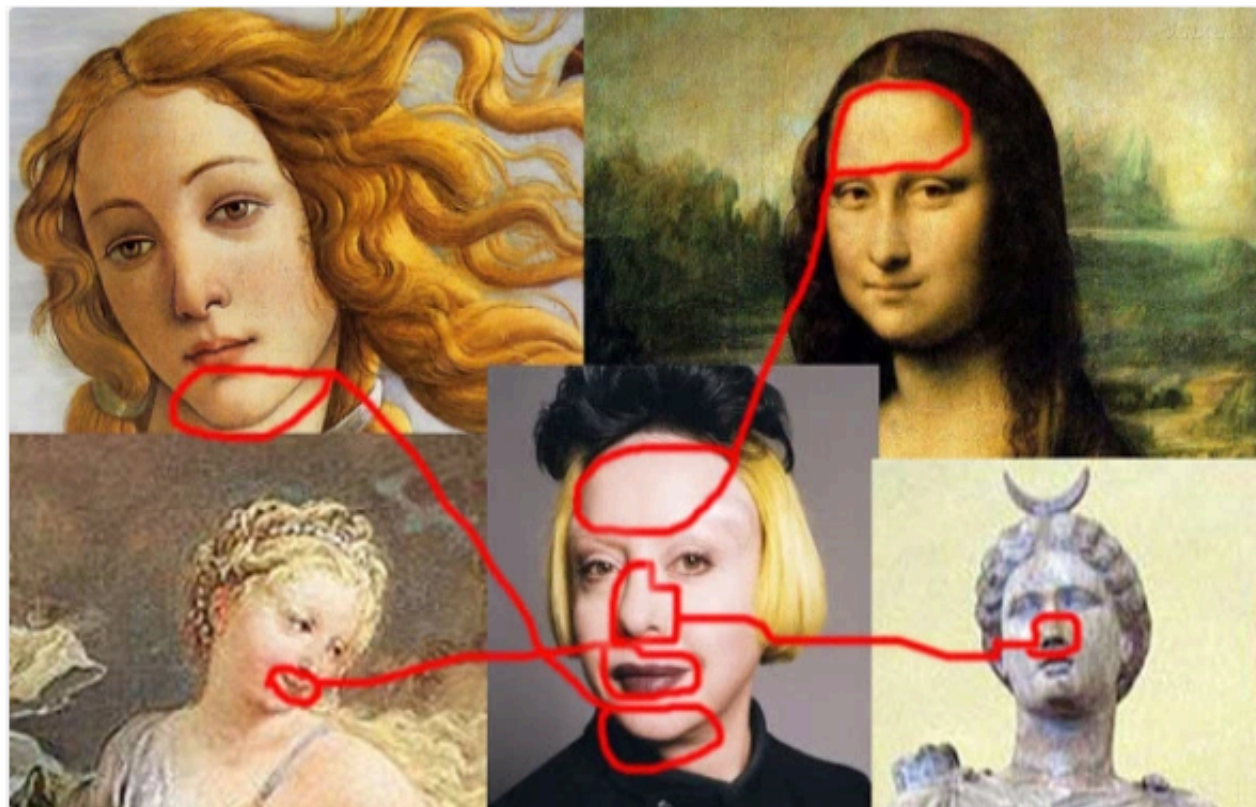


Embodied Learning Makes 'The Classics' Relevant

by [Adam Zucker](#) April 27, 2018



Saint Orlean's Reincarnation (1990). Courtesy of [Chromatic Spiral](#)

Embodied Learning is a Constructivist educational theory and practice that integrates sensory and cognitive responses in order to solve a problem. Embodied Learning encompasses students intellectual, physical, and social engagement through a collaborative process where students aren't solely thinking about solutions, but rather, living the solutions. This isn't dissimilar to many practices in contemporary art, where the artist combines themselves and the viewer into an active partnership. This is seen in previous posts, which discussed Pablo Helguera's [Social Practice Art](#) and [experiential art works](#) by Tino Sehgal and James Turrell.

Having students engage in a physical or social activity in response to works of art will enhance their personal understanding and appreciation of the

work. According to a study in museum education by Hubbard (2007), embodied experiences make the knowledge that students would ordinarily receive from a lecture more meaningful. By integrating their unique personal experiences into art appreciation, students will make meaningful connections and realize the timelessness of works of art. The way educators can introduce students to "classic" artworks created across time and place, might be best served through an embodied learning approach. For example, after having an analytical dialog around a specific painting by J.M.W. Turner, students could be prompted to approach the work through poetry. In fact, Turner himself devoted time and energy to thinking about and writing poetry, a fact that could be shared with the students after they've created their own unique responses to Turner's work of art. Students would be asked to reflect upon the painting by writing the first several words that come to fruition while standing before the artwork. Having compiled a list of reactions, the students could form small groups and collaborate on a combinatory poem that is a social and emotional response to the visual artwork. The combined poems can then be read out loud in a staged poetry reading.

Report this ad

Another example of an embodied learning experience that analyzes, interprets and re-presents Turner's work could include either the construction of a performance or a soundtrack that responds to the painting. Looking at Turner's [*Fishing Boats Entering Calais Harbor \(1803\)*](#), students could be prompted to describe the scene using sounds. They can each select a particular element of the painting to act or sound out. For example, one student might look at the painting, notice the intensity of the waves, and make the sound of a turbulent sea. Another might add the voices of the fishermen shouting to each other as they steer their vessel into the harbor. Each visitor can add their 'instrument' on top of the other until a fully enlivened soundtrack has been created. Through this exercise, they've metaphorically stepped into the artist's world and have understood

that painting is not solely a visual experience.

Analyzing work by contemporary artists who have remixed and referenced historical works of art is another way that educators can incorporate embodied learning into engaging lessons. In a previous post, we looked at how [Kehinde Wiley's remixing of Baroque and Neo-Classical paintings](#) from the Western Canon, reflected the contemporary urban experience. There are also great examples of how contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman and ORLAN use embodied practices to transform historical imagery into a contemporary form of expression in order to address the intersectionality of identity and make historical works more relevant to contemporary issues.

ORLAN's landmark work [The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN](#), featured her undergoing nine plastic surgeries, which adapted characteristics of women featured in famous historical artworks. Her transformation included the forehead of da Vinci's [Mona Lisa](#), the chin of *Venus* from Botticelli's [The Birth of Venus](#), the nose from Jean-Léon Gérôme's portrayal of Psyche, the lips of [François Boucher's](#) depiction of *Europa*, and the eyes of Roman Goddess [Diana](#), from a 16th Century French painting. By synthesizing all of these elements from women portrayed in famous works of art, ORLAN commented on the perception of beauty in Western Culture. Her monumental work of embodied art critically analyzed and presented ways in which the canon of Western Art has been designed and implemented for the enjoyment and gaze of the male viewer.

Cindy Sherman also comments on the historical depiction of women through the lens of the male gaze. Through acting as the model, stylist, art director, and photographer, Sherman re-presents iconic imagery of women in order to challenge traditional perceptions that men typically express when viewing women in film and magazines. For example, her series titled *Centerfolds* (1981) exposes the stereotypes that are frequently used to portray women in the entertainment and advertising industries. In an

interview about this series, Sherman [stated](#) that she “wanted a man opening up the magazine suddenly look at it with an expectation of something lascivious and then feel like the violator that they would be looking at this woman who is perhaps a victim. I didn’t think of them as victims at the time...Obviously I’m trying to make someone feel bad for having a certain expectation” (Minissale, 2013). By using an embodied process, where Sherman physically transforms herself into canonical depictions of women throughout Western History, she is making a powerful contemporary statement about how our collective culture still embraces traditional chauvinistic models.

Report this ad

Taking inspiration from ORLAN and Sherman, students can think about how they can express themselves in response to visual culture, in a way that is reflective of how they envision themselves in contemporary society. In education, the term ‘enduring understandings’ is used to signify the “big ideas” that are crucial to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom. In other words, what are the core tenets and framework that students need to understand so that they will have the skill set to revisit them over the course of their life? Art provides a conceptual and emotional foundation wherein artists utilize the power of intellectual, physical, and social engagement to address contemporary issues and themes that matter to them.



An embodied learning activity around Matisse's *The Dance*. Courtesy of artist/educator [Lionel Cruet](#).

Whether referencing works of historical or contemporary art, an embodied learning exercise in the art classroom should include a critical discussion around what elements students can relate to within a work of art and how they might incorporate those elements into their own realm. Students could then discuss how they'd re-stage historical works of art in order to create an original artwork that expresses their personal and cultural relevance. Some examples include adapting characters within historical paintings into a contemporary environment by re-staging the original scene as a collaborative performance, a photo shoot, or a soundtrack that represents certain elements from the original work in a new context. We looked at a hypothetical model for embodied learning featuring the work of the 18th Century British painter J.M.W. Turner, as well as how contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman and ORLAN use embodied practices to transform

historical representations into a contemporary feminist statement. A great example of how embodied learning can be practically implemented in a diverse educational setting is contemporary artist Lionel Cruet's lesson for High School students around *The Dance (I)* (1909) by Henri Matisse. Cruet's unit on *The Dance* transforms the classic painting into an embodied art project, where students examined [The Dance \(I\)](#) (1909) on view at The Museum of Modern Art New York and created their own contemporary interpretations of the painting by working collaboratively in groups to pose as the figures in the famous painting. The painting has been associated with the "Dance of the Young Girls" from Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's ballet and orchestral composition *The Rites of Spring* (1913). What would these jovial figures be dancing along to if they were transported into the current era?

For many of us, the arts are a way to express personal and symbolic representation. The individual's knowledge of art comes through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences in a manner that has relevance within their own lives. Embodied learning unites traditional information and context with engaging activities that enable students to interact with artworks in a myriad of highly personalized ways.

References, Notes, Suggested Reading:

Hubard, Olga (2007). [Complete Engagement: Embodied Response in Art Museum Education](#). *Art Education*, 60(6), 46-56.

Minissale, Gregory (2013). *The Psychology of Contemporary Art*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. p.67.