ACM Florence: Arts, Humanities, and Culture Program, Fall 2011

Weaving the Tale: Literary and Visual Art Narratives of Renaissance Florence

Course Description and Goals

Studying the cupola mosaics of the Florence Baptistery, one notes four biblical narratives: the history of the world from the Creation to the Flood and the lives of Joseph, Jesus, and John the Baptist. Arranged in four separate bands, the stories can be read horizontally and thus chronologically, and vertically, i.e. typologically and allegorically. Italo Calvino, the most widely translated contemporary Italian master of storytelling, employs a similar strategy in his short story cycles *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies*. The stories in these cycles, told through a sequence of fifteenth-century French and Italian tarot cards, and illustrated with reproductions of the cards, can be read chronologically, as arranged in the printed book, or else the reading can follow the arrangement of the cards (for instance, cross-wise or from back to front). There is yet another dimension to Calvino’s narrative strategy and to the narrative of the Baptistery mosaic artist, Gaddo Gaddi. Just as the Baptistery visual narratives are inspired by Biblical stories, Calvino’s stories reprise episodes from Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, inviting multiple, layered narrative arrangements.
Italian visual and language artists are especially fond of such narrative inter-weaving. Taking advantage of on-site explorations of room and furniture art in Florentine palazzos and of church art in Florence and Siena, we will analyze the narrative structures of art objects designed for daily consumption and reflection. We will study the interfaces of these narrative structures with tales and tale cycles by authors from the Italian Renaissance or authors writing about the Italian Renaissance. The goal is to develop an understanding of the close, lived relationship between the world of Renaissance Florentines and ancient or Christian history, of the porous boundaries between modernity and history, the secular and the sacred in the Renaissance. We will also pose the question about the state of these boundaries today, based on the modern readings and your lived experience of present-day Italian culture.

Texts (at the Paperback Exchange)


Short online readings linked to the syllabus.

Course Requirements

**Attendance/ Participation (20%)**: In every venue, energetic listening (including note-taking and thoughtful engagement with others’ ideas) and culturally sensitive behavior are assumed. In addition, you are expected to attend all class meetings and site visits; abide by the 10 Commandments of Study Abroad and honor the needs of the group; arrive at destinations on time; treat with politeness and unselfishness all peers, lecturers, and staff at the sites.

**A presentation (10%)** on the nature and function of narrative techniques in a work of narrative visual art or in a literary work (excluding *The Decameron*).

**Brigata Assignment (25%)**: For each day of *The Decameron* you read, create a seating chart of the storytellers, taking into account how their relationships are likely to affect who sits with whom, and how the stories told may affect the seating arrangement. You will also research one member of the brigata (to be assigned) to create a new literary portrait of the character. The portrait should include reflection on background, physical and psychological characteristics, symbolic value, preferred storytelling motifs, themes, and techniques, and your storyteller’s reaction to the tales of the others members of the brigata. The research part of the brigata assignment would be about 5-6 pages and must include a relevant visual component (photographs, drawings, collage, etc.)

**Final Project (30%)**: A drawing sequence/photo essay or a tale cycle adapting, appropriating, or critiquing one of the works studied in the class (8-10 pp.). If your presentation was on a work of narrative visual art, you must compose a tale cycle; conversely, if you presented on a literary
work, you would have to develop a drawing sequence/photo essay. Hybrid art forms are encouraged. Each project must include an author’s or artist’s statement (1-2 pp) on the goals of the work and its relationship to the source work(s).

A final oral exam (15%), when you would introduce your creative project to the class and field questions about the narrative techniques you’ve used.

Schedule

Week 1
1st class: Introduction to the course: themes, concepts, methodologies, assignments. Sign-up for presentations.

2nd class: Calvino, “The Castle of Crossed Destinies” (CCD).

Week 2
1st class: Calvino, “The Tavern of Crossed Destinies” (CCD).

2nd class: Field trip to Sienna. Reading narrative public art: Amrogio Lorenzetti, Good and Bad Government in Palazzo Pubblico. Reading church art narratives at the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena. Catherine of Siena’s relics in San Dominico.

Week 3:


Week 4: Break (Buon viaggio!).

Week 5


Week 6
1st class: The Decameron, Fifth Day (under the rule of Fiammetta). Novelle 1 (Cimone and Iphigenia), 4 (Caterina's Nightingale), 9 (Federigo degli Alberighi's Falcon). Cassoni visual narratives (Nastagio and Botticelli). Brigata chart due.
2nd class: *The Decameron*, Sixth Day (under the rule of Elissa): Novelle 3 (Monna Nonna de' Pulci) and 7 (Madonna Filippa's transgression). Seventh Day (under the rule of Dioneo): Novelle 2 (Peronella) and 5 (a jealous husband). Who rules the domestic space? Class meets at Palazzo Davanzati. **Brigata chart due.**

**Week 7**
1st class: *The Decameron*, Ninth Day (under the rule of Emilia). Novelle 1 (Madonna Francesca), 2 (an Abbess), 10 (donno Gianni and compar Pietro). **Brigata chart due.**

2nd class: *The Decameron*, Tenth Day. Novelle 10 (the Marquis of Saluzzo and patient Griselda) and *The Author's Epilogue*. **Griselda cassone. Complete Brigata assignment due (all charts and literary portrait).**

**Week 8**
1st class: *Book of Esther* (Hebrew Bible), Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’Medici, “The Story of Queen Esther” (SN). Visit to the Sala dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio (with a stop, in anticipation of the next reading assignment, at Donatello’s original *Judith and Holofernes* in the Sala dei Gigli), then on to the Boboli Gardens.

2nd class: Read the *Book of Judith*. Class meets in front of the Baptistry: Judith and Holofernes on Ghiberti’s doors; then on to the Uffizi: Botticelli’s, Mantegna’s, and Gentileschi’s Judith narratives. **Due: proposal for final project** (1-2 paragraphs on the topic and medium, structural breakdown, ideas for links, plus a short bibliography).

**Week 9**
1st class: Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’Medici, “The Story of Judith, Hebrew Widow” (SN).

2nd class: Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’Medici, “The Story of Devout Susanna,” along with Gentileschi, Veronese, and Tintoretto’s visual narratives. Class (hopefully) ends with a visit to the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze to view Tornabuoni’s illuminated manuscript.

**Week 10**

2nd class: Banti, *Artemisia*. Class (hopefully) at Banti’s house, the Fondazione Di Studi Di Storia Dell’Arte Roberto Longhi.

**Week 11**
1st class: Group workshops of final projects.

2nd class: **Oral exam on your visual, art, or mixed-media narrative, and festive finale. Turn in your final project.**

**Important note:** This syllabus is very much a work in progress and will be finalized at the start of the fall 2011 semester. Some of the class visits will be arranged in conjunction with other ACM Florence courses.