Interdisciplinary forays within the history classroom:

how the visual arts can enhance (or hinder) historical understanding

How might history and art mutually enrich each other and enhance pupil experience? The short answer, and there is much more to be said as Liz Dawes Duraisingh and Veronica Boix Mansilla show, is by taking themselves seriously as disciplines. This article reports and reflects on a case study of truly interdisciplinary work that aimed to integrate artistic understanding into historical learning in strategic and rigorous ways. The results of this rigorous and disciplined approach are very encouraging: as the discussion of pupil outcomes suggests, integrating historical inquiry with the distinct concepts, tools and modes of thinking associated with another discipline can create a new understanding that could not have arisen through an historical lens alone and can enhance pupils' personal connection with the past and their sense of the relevance of past events.

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Commemorating pasts

On a warm day in June, twenty students aged between 16 and 18 are seated in a circular arrangement, listening attentively to one of their classmates present her design for a monument commemorating the victims of the Rwandan genocide. Pointing to her carefully constructed maquette (Figure 1), Chantelle explains why she chose to commemorate this particular genocide and to use an hourglass as the central metaphor; she discusses how locating her monument at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC would maximize its impact on the public by offering a provocative counterpoint to the commitment of 'never again' with which many visitors leave the museum. Her classmates follow up with questions about her aesthetic choices and her interpretation of the event. They wonder if the hourglass was purposefully designed to be larger than the humans walking by it. They ask Chantelle about her reasons to commemorate Rwanda over other genocides.

Another student, Paul, presents his model of a memorial to victims of nuclear bombs (Figure 2). His memorial is not located on a single site. Instead, his model shows human shadows to be painted on numerous existing buildings both in Hiroshima and Washington DC in such a way that his monument is integrated into the daily fabric of people's lives. The shadows represent actual victims of the Hiroshima bombing and are accompanied by small plaques with their names. Information kiosks provide maps, the names of other victims and information about the bombings.

As stories of student engagement, imagination and critical dialogue, these vignettes speak to the core issue examined in this paper—that is, the enhancement of historical understanding through interdisciplinary learning experiences, in this case through integration of the arts. Creating an effective monument demands that students put history and art in productive dialogue with one another. Drawing from the practice of an accomplished

Boston history teacher, Judi Freeman, we propose that creating a monument invites students to (1) grapple with issues of historical significance, (2) advance new questions and interpretations of the period under study, and (3) connect and engage with the past as they develop a personal position.[1]

History and interdisciplinary work

As a discipline, history is naturally open to interaction with other domains. Since its professionalisation in the late nineteenth century, important transformations in the discipline have resulted from contact with economics, sociology, literary theory and, more recently, genetics. Such productive cross fertilizations enabled historians to raise new questions, expand their evidentiary base and reflect about the nature of their accounts. Because of its permeability to other domains, history has been characterized as a 'synoptic discipline'—that is, it tends to integrate knowledge from a broad variety of contexts.[2]

Despite such permeability, historians share a commitment to empirical methods and more or less agreed upon standards of validation to understand the past.[3] For example, for most historians, accounts of Rwanda or the Second World War are validated when they survive the scrutiny of their community of peers—scrutiny that embodies contemporary standards for historical inquiry (e.g., a disposition against careless interpretation of sources, mono-causal explanations,

Figure 1: Chantelle's monument to the Rwandan genocide

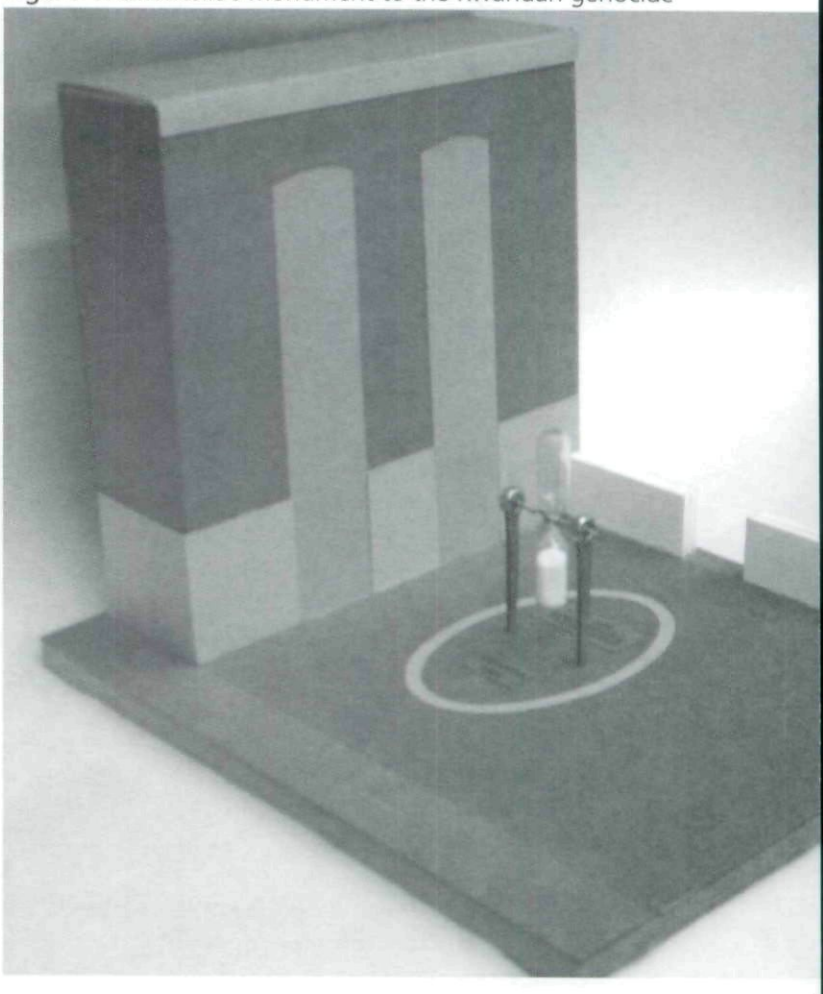

Figure 2: Paul's monument to the victims of nuclear bombs

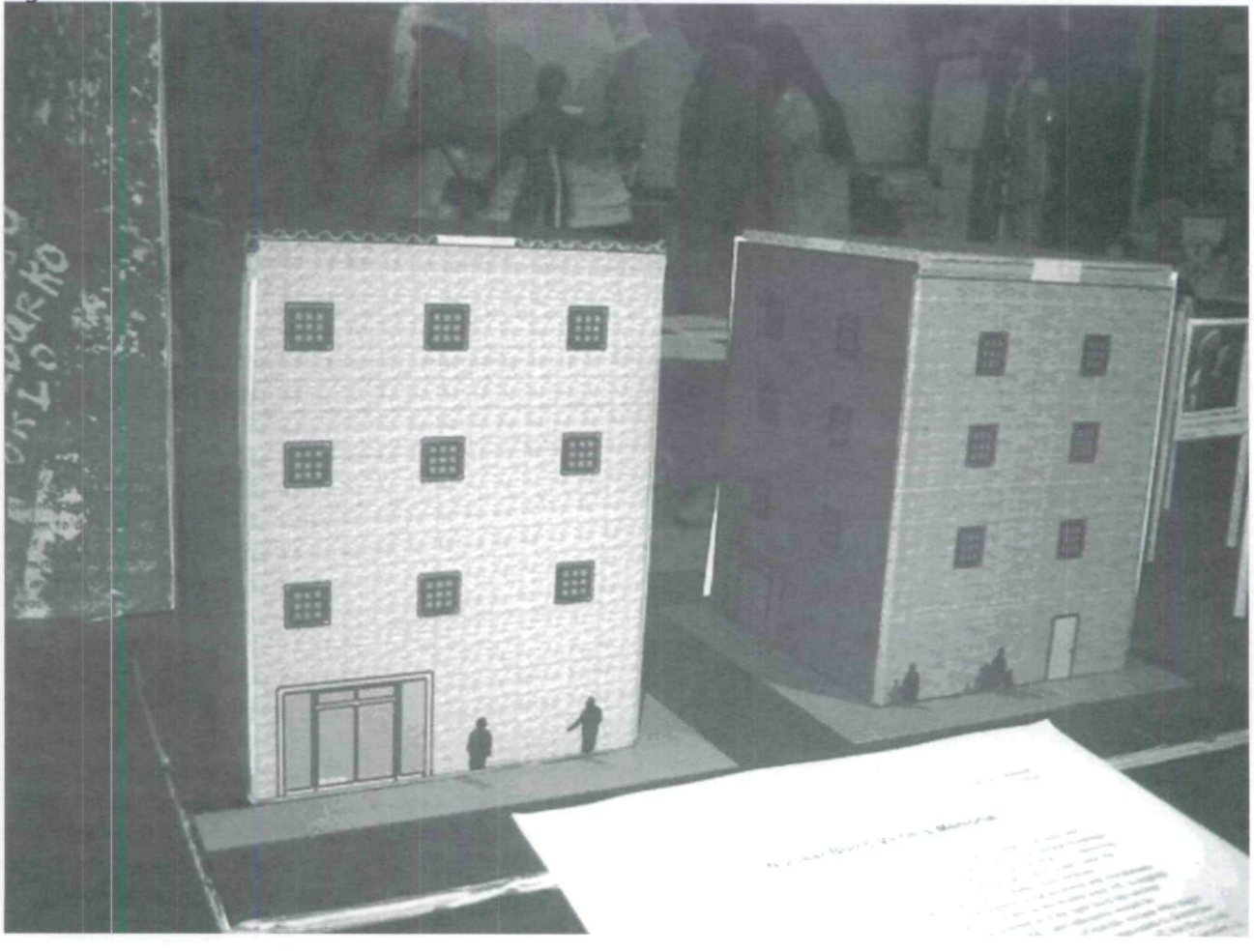

Figure 3: Freeman's monument project: scaffolding student learning

YEAR LONG MONUMENT PROJECT
Teacher shows students how to analyse expert work: Students go on field visits and watch slide shows of existing monuments; they analyse films, Nazi propaganda and art works. Teacher draws attention to ways in which visual symbols create a response in viewers, capture events and focus attention.
Class discussions about historical significance: The teacher leads discussions comparing monuments from different periods and by different artists to consider which events and what aspects of these events get commemorated and why (e.g. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial).
Concept creation: Students decide on the genocide, event, or persons on which they would like to focus, beginning to articulate the reasons for their choice, monument intention and overall form.
Design proposals: Students submit proposals. Teacher gives feedback seeking to make sure that students pay appropriate attention to historical grounding and artistic choices.
Individual historical research: Students research their topics. Teacher recommends sources and accounts and encourages students to ponder differing interpretations.
Maquette Production: Students produce their maquettes and accompanying reflective essays explaining their design choices.
Class presentations and discussion: Students articulate their choices further and hear others' sometimes unexpected interpretations.
Exhibition: The monuments are exhibited for the wider school community.

and unilateral accounts).[4] Likewise, in quality history classes, students are given multiple opportunities to explore currently held accounts of the past and engage in historical modes of thinking. They assess the significance of social, political, and cultural developments[5]; build multi-causal explanations and consider various historical actors' points of view.[6] They interpret sources to establish evidence, weave together historical narratives and discern among competing accounts.[7] Given the nature of historical knowledge, students demonstrate their best understanding of Rwanda or the Second World War when they can link particular actors and events to broader interpretations about the period, reasoning flexibly about them.

Interdisciplinary work extends historical inquiry by integrating it with distinct concepts, tools and modes of thinking in another domain to create a new understanding (e.g. a product or an explanation) that could not have arisen through a historical lens alone.[8] From this standpoint, monument creation is inherently interdisciplinary. The act of memorializing requires that we understand the past to be remembered, have a sense of why it is worth remembering, and find expressive means—such as the gesture in a soldier, the words on an inscription—to invite reflection among generations to come. When monuments bring together a rigorous understanding of past lives and potent aesthetic forms of expression, they become genuine interdisciplinary artifacts.

Interdisciplinary forays in the history classroom

In schools most students are likely to engage in *thematic* and *multi*disciplinary rather than *inter*disciplinary work of any kind. In other words, a theme or phenomenon is looked at from two or more disciplinary perspectives without any deep integration taking place. For example, students who are studying the Second World War in history might make artwork on the theme of war in art class or read Elie Wiesel's *Night* in English, without making any purposeful or explicit connections between these different activities. Furthermore, common tasks such as designing war-time recruitment posters or creating illustrated concept maps —while valuable—tend to draw only superficially from the arts. They are typically used to add variety to lessons or to appeal to students' different learning styles rather than to achieve a new understanding that *requires* the arts to be

taken seriously. We suggest that students could benefit from learning experiences in which a more deliberate selection and integration of disciplinary insights is involved, and high standards for aesthetic, historical and synthetic reasoning are upheld.

In Judi Freeman's *Facing History* course,[9] the monument project is the culmination of a year-long examination of discrimination and its potential escalation into violence, human rights abuses and genocide, with a focus on the role of individuals in effecting change. Students are instructed to design a monument or memorial to a person, group, event or theme that in any way connects to what has been studied on the course. Freeman weaves teaching about memorials throughout her course, supporting students to develop sophisticated analyses of multiple memorial examples and make informed decisions when creating their own (Figure 3).

A monument project of this kind invites students to step back from the history they have studied and synthesize through a visual metaphor what they consider to be the essence of the event or period they are memorializing. This process of interpreting the past can open up new ways of understanding that are not possible through the historian's usual narrative means. Howard Gardner describes artistic forms of knowledge as 'less sequential, more holistic and organic, than other forms of knowing.'[10] Artistic works invite multiple interpretations and ambiguity, as well as a personal and emotional response—something that historical forms of knowledge typically do not.

Three key learning opportunities emerge at the crossroads of history and art in the monument project. The project *invites* students to grapple with historical significance; to advance new questions about the past; and to develop a personal position about the events under study. The degree to which each invitation proves productive will depend on the clarity and expertise with which teachers support students to understand history, the visual arts, and the nature of synthesis.

Grappling with historical significance

Previous articles of *Teaching History* have focused on the importance of giving students opportunities to think seriously about historical significance.[11] Christine Counsell reminds us that significance is 'not a property of the event itself. It is something that is ascribed to that event, development or situation.'[12] Events may be considered significant for very different reasons—for example, because of their uniqueness, their impact on subsequent events, or their resonance with contemporary concerns. Deliberations about significance are typically informed by philosophical assumptions concerning how history 'works'—for example, whether one views powerful individuals or larger societal processes as typically affecting historical change.

Creating a monument requires more than gathering and posting information about the past. It invites students to identify a leading metaphor or image, such as Paul's shadows or Chantelle's imposing hourglass, that captures an essential dimension of the period under study (Figure 4). To establish significance, students must deliberate and explain not only what or who is worth remembering, but also the essence of what is to be remembered. For example, Paul described his choice of the atomic bombs for his final monument as a means to commemorate the momentous nature of the dropping of the bomb *and* the unprecedented scale of destruction and suffering it created on the ground:

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> *Everybody knew about them and, you know, this whole nuclear era kicked off. This was an incredibly important moment … but then I captured what it was actually like for these people on the ground. They were there, they died, they were mutilated, or they got cancer, or their families did … So it brought together that.*

The location chosen by Chantelle for her monument points explicitly to the historical significance she ascribes to the Rwandan genocide:

> *The museum's message is 'Never again' and that is inscribed on the walls of the [United States Holocaust Memorial] Museum. And so it would be appropriate to have a memorial to Rwanda there to show that it did happen again. And that it could happen again. Because the hourglass was inspired by Rwanda but it could be true of any genocide, if people fail to act in time.*

In other words, she is putting her monument in dialogue with another monument (the museum) to emphasize the appalling continuity between the Holocaust and subsequent genocides. In a sense Rwanda is significant not because it is unique but because it reveals the ongoing potential for genocide in human society and the general reluctance of the international community to intervene when it takes place. On the other hand, the Rwandan genocide was distinctive from other genocides because of the speed with which the killings were carried out—and this specific feature is provocatively captured in the hourglass.

The monuments project also invites students to think specifically about the contemporary relevance of what they are memorializing. Chantelle is trying to communicate a sense of urgency about the need to take action against modern-day genocides like Darfur. Paul commented that 'the project made me think about why does [Hiroshima] matter, how do I mesh this into the real world?' By placing one version of his monument in Washington DC he is trying to draw a link between the victims of Hiroshima (and other

Figure 4: Questions to help students think about historical significance

- **Who or what do I think is worth remembering with a monument? Why?**
- **In what ways do I hope my monument will be meaningful or relevant for people living today?**
- **In what ways might my monument upset some people or cause controversy? Why?**

nuclear attacks) and subsequent and future casualties of US military action:

> *...in DC it's like being haunted by these ghosts of people ... and I could romantically imagine a lawmaker getting out of Congress and walking down and seeing this and thinking, you know, 'What's the impact of my decision?'*

Students are asked to consider the likely response of different audiences to their monument. In so doing they are challenged to think about how societies today represent the past and assign significance. Paul—who views his monument as a 'neutral' comment on the tragedy of war—perhaps underestimates the way in which his monument could be interpreted as a direct criticism of US foreign policy. The Enola Gay exhibit proposed by curators at the Smithsonian in 1993, for example, generated considerable controversy because critics claimed that it focused on the horror of the attack rather than its role in ending World War II. But Paul does show sensitivity toward his potential audience; referring to the proposed location of a version of his monument in Hiroshima, he comments

> *I wish I could have gone and interviewed people about would you like this monument? Would you want this here? Would you accept it? How do you feel about America, how do you feel about an American person coming here with this idea? How does that mesh in with your own memories or scar?*

Finally, the monuments project gives students an opportunity to think about how monuments *per se* capture historical significance and perform their function as sites of memory in contemporary society. Freeman exposes students to a variety of monuments from different periods of history—from a statue of George Washington in downtown Boston, to Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. She alerts students to the different (and potentially shifting) purposes that monuments can serve, including honouring the dead, conveying messages about national identity, or provoking reflection about the cost of war or ongoing injustices.

While some theorists have questioned the very legitimacy of creating monuments in that they artificially "fix" public memory about the past[13], this project is based on the premise that creating a monument is a worthwhile and culturally valuable endeavor. However, Freeman encourages students to "think outside the box"—as Paul did with his shadow concept—and to create monuments likely to challenge and/or resonate with contemporary audiences. Indeed, some of her students produce what James Young might describe as "counter-monuments[14]—such as Krzysztof Wodiczko's projection of subversive and provocative images on to existing monuments[15]—which aim to disturb and shock rather than venerate the past. Awareness of different examples and kinds of monuments helps students to think about *how* monuments function to capture historical significance.

Interpreting, representing, and inquiring about the past

As works of art, monuments can be 'packed' with meaning. Successful artistic metaphors invite multiple interpretations. Choosing visual metaphors by which to represent the past encourages students to develop more nuanced understandings of how history can be variously interpreted. On one level, for example, Chantelle's monument is a literal reference to a comment in a television documentary by the Czech Ambassador to the United Nations, Karol Kovanda: 'There were lives at stake, lives which were just like sand disappearing through our hands day after day.' However, she has adapted the image of sand slipping through fingers to sand running through an hourglass. This hourglass image evokes the idea of wasted lives and unstoppable killing; it also projects a sense of time running out and observers like Kovanda hopelessly standing by as the genocide took on a momentum of its own. Chantelle's timepiece is designed to turn automatically every three hours to symbolize the three months of frenzied killing that took place in Rwanda; the unprecedented speed of this genocide set it apart from others and this monument is specifically about that event. However, on a more abstract level the timepiece is also intended to be a reminder of the urgency of preventing other genocides, such as Darfur. As Chantelle commented, 'Through using a symbol to represent [the Rwandan genocide] I got the bigger idea that could be applied to other genocides, the importance of certain aspects of it, the urgency of acting.'

Paul's shadow metaphor similarly generates multiple interpretations. He explains that on one level, the shadows concretely refer to the effect of the blinding light of the Hiroshima bomb. Paul had been struck by a survivor's

recollection of seeing the shadow of her teacher cast against the classroom blackboard before almost everyone in the school was incinerated. He became interested in the light effects of nuclear explosions and was concerned to create realistic shadows in his design: 'The silhouettes in all locations would be painted in the locations and orientations where actual shadows would have been cast by victims as the bombs went off.' But Paul's visual metaphor is more than a literal representation of what happened on the ground at Hiroshima. He also intended the shadows to convey more abstractly the loss of life and the empty holes left in society by the deaths of so many people. Moreover, the metaphor takes on a different significance depending on the location of the monument: 'It has different meanings even in the different locations … like in Hiroshima it's almost like a tombstone … so a person won't be forgotten … And then in DC it's like being haunted by the ghosts of people.'

Theorists have written about the impossibility of adequately representing horrific events such as the Holocaust[16]; Paul alluded to this problem when he commented 'You realize you can't have a hundred thousand shadows in the city, you can only have a hundred … it really brings home the scale of it when you try to compress it down to one thing like that.'

When standards of historical accuracy and aesthetic power are upheld, the design of a monument invites students to raise novel questions about the period under study. In her class Freeman encourages students to avoid generic treatments of their topics. When students propose monuments to 'human suffering,' she demands that they articulate the *particular* kind of human suffering that took place, for example, in Rwanda or Japan. Questions about the particularities of each event lead students to further examination of primary sources and accounts and newly articulated aesthetic decisions in turn.

Engaging with the past: developing a personal position

Personal meaning and opinion are of paramount importance in the arts. When students are able to express themselves through the arts, as they are in this project, they are given permission to explore their emotions and develop a personal position with regard to the past—that is, they begin to expand their historical consciousness. How does a well conceived monument project accomplish this task?

First, it invites students to situate themselves in a temporal continuum as they think about how to make the experience of the past meaningful and relevant for current and future audiences. Chantelle, for instance, compares different genocides and tries to convey a sense of urgency about contemporary human rights violations; Paul thinks about the enduring legacy of Hiroshima and aspires to influence legislators in Washington today. Their awareness of the development of the form and function of monuments over time also means that they can place their own design in the context of the history of monument making. Paul's design, for example, deliberately breaks with the convention of a single site monument, while Chantelle builds on an existing place of memory.

Second, monuments allow students to memorialize events or people that are significant for them or the communities of which they are a part. For example, some African American students chose to remember the victims of lynching, students with Jewish ties focused on the Holocaust, and a student of Pakistani origin chose to commemorate the 1971 war between East and West Pakistan. Many students spoke of developing a stronger emotional connection to the people they were honouring by their monument. Chantelle and Paul—who had no pre-existing connection to either Hiroshima or Rwanda—also became very invested in their monuments and what they were remembering. Paul commented,

> *When you try to memorialize it, it makes it very personal because it's like you have this responsibility to these people … You know, it's like you're taking part in [history]—it's like my contribution to history could be this monument. Like these people died and here's what I did: I remembered them. I did something about it instead of just knowing it and absorbing it for myself. I took part, you know, took action.*

When standards of historical accuracy and aesthetic power are upheld, the design of a monument invites students to raise novel questions about the period under study.

Paul's words suggest that he views himself as an active and historically informed agent change—a sense of agency that many of Freeman's students report developing through taking her course.

Finally, carefully conceived monument projects invite students to develop an intellectual opinion about the past. History teachers encourage their students to form opinions all the time—for example, through argumentative essays. However, creating a monument for public display and exploring themes artistically seems to act as a catalyst for students in terms of developing a personal position or standpoint. Chantelle remarked, 'We're given the facts but the monument project allows us to generate more ideas about it, what it means. … This is one thing that I particularly drew from the Rwandan Genocide—maybe other people would focus on other themes.'

Potential pitfalls and assessment strategies

While making a monument *invites* more sophisticated thinking about the past—it does not guarantee it. As a prerequisite, students must have sound historical understanding of what they want to memorialize. In this regard students in a memorial project face learning challenges that are common to history classrooms more generally, such as overcoming *presentism*, linear

Figure 5: Qualities to look for when assessing students' work on monuments

PURPOSE

Does the student understand the purpose(s) of creating a monument?

HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Does the student show sound historical understanding of the people or event being commemorated?

Has the student thought about why this person or event is historically significant or worth commemorating?

Is the student grounding claims or images on primary and well-selected secondary sources?

ARTISTIC GROUNDING

Has the student made thoughtful choices concerning artistic methods—for example, line, shape, pattern and form?

Has the student paid attention to the overall aesthetic effect of the monument—creating, for example, a sense of balance or movement within the piece?

INTEGRATION

Has the student created an effective visual metaphor that synthesizes important aspects of the historical event or person being commemorated?

Does the monument invite multiple meanings or interpretations?

REFLECTION

Has the student shown thoughtfulness about the process of bringing history and art together to create a monument?

Does the student show awareness of the limitations of his or her monument?

explanations, and the illusion of understanding how historical actors 'really felt'. Quality monuments also depend on students expanding their beliefs about the nature of the visual arts. In this realm students must move beyond a focus on the arts as mastery of technique, to address more interpretive dimensions of the arts such as the power of symbolism and visualization as well as the role of the arts as a tool for cultural critique.

Reinterpreting their understandings of the past through an aesthetic lens also confronts students with the challenge of synthesis. Shortcomings in students' monuments that relate to misconceptions about the functions of a monument and of the interplay they demand between art and history are not uncommon in a project of this kind. Recognizing learning challenges in advance may serve teachers and students well. For example, students occasionally produce

monuments that are not rooted in a specific historic event or context. These monuments may be highly accomplished artistically and be designed to provoke emotional responses from visitors. However, they relate only to universal feelings —as in the case of one monument which required visitors to descend into a dark, womb-like chamber to contemplate the sadness of children being caught up in war *in general*. These monuments do not function effectively to commemorate specific events or people. In them the invitation to deepen *historical* understanding is missed.

In contrast, some students are *too* concerned about displaying their historical knowledge; they use their monuments as vehicles for conveying information about the past, cramming in as many details as they can at the expense of aesthetic considerations. For example, some monuments foreground information boards or incorporate multiple visual sources from the event being remembered. One student, who designed a mural to commemorate the 1974 crisis in Boston over the forced busing of students, commented that she wanted to "make it completely true … to not pretend or omit some of the things … I just felt like I had to get a very broad range of photos to capture it." Her primary concern was to educate the viewer about what happened rather than to create a metaphorical interpretation of the event. Furthermore, while well intended, her aspiration to produce "a completely true story" suggests a common misconception about the nature of historical knowledge. This student failed to see historical accounts (including her own) as selective—i.e., informing and being informed by an overall narrative structure of beginning, turning points, and ending, that foregrounds actors and events and privileges particular causal connections, based on available and selected sources.

Still other students will exhibit a selective approach to the past but try to illustrate or 'copy' descriptions of the event they studied, rather than trying to represent it metaphorically or synthesizing information about it; these students may produce detailed recreations of historic sites or literal representations of what took place. For example, one monument we saw was a detailed reconstruction of the kind of hut where Japanese soldiers abused Korean "comfort women" during World War II. In these monuments the opportunity to see historical accounts as selective and interpretive is missed. Occasionally students are outraged by others' suffering and aim to shock viewers in a way that is not sensitive to either the audience or genre, neither is it contextualized in a sensible overall account of the period studied. The opportunity for a deeper reflection and personal interpretation of the event is missed.

To avoid such pitfalls, teachers may invite students to close reading of accomplished monuments and help them distill how such monuments work. When examining monuments, artworks, films or theatre plays, teachers may invite students to consider the creator's intent, how the work selects and represents the past, how 'accurate' a portrayal of the past it is, how aesthetic tools are employed to produce particular effects in the viewer, and how they experience the work themselves.

But how can teachers determine if one monument is more accomplished than another? In Figure 5 we suggest some qualities to look for when assessing this genre of students' work. The questions highlight what is unique or special about this kind of interdisciplinary learning opportunity, rather than generic qualities such as 'effort' or 'presentation'.[17] We emphasize the need for students to demonstrate (1) a sense of purpose about building a monument, (2) robust disciplinary grounding (in both history and art), (3) a coherent and effective integration of art and history, and (4) reflectiveness about the process of bringing history and art together and the benefits and limitations of doing this kind of work. To assess students' performance across these dimensions, teachers must consider a variety of evidence, rather than just the physical monument itself; this is why the reflective essay and class presentation are important for both developing and assessing student understanding.

> When you try to memorialize it, it makes it very personal because it's like you have this responsibility to these people… You know, it's like you're taking part in [history].

Conclusion

We have outlined several ways in which students' historical understanding can be extended by integrating the arts into the history classroom. We have claimed that creating monuments provides opportunities for students to reason about historical significance, advance new questions about the past, construct and justify interpretations and position themselves in relationship to the past, present and future. We have tried to make it clear that it is not advisable to set a monuments project without appropriate preparation or scaffolding for students—preparation that nurtures solid historical understanding of the event or period that students are memorializing, challenges conceptions of the visual arts as solely pertaining to technique and advances a firm understanding of what monuments are and how they function. Freeman's skillful weaving of the theme of monuments and memorials throughout her course is a good model to follow in this regard.

At first glance, Paul and Chantelle's monuments are deceptively simple. Technical mastery and detail are not prioritized either in their work nor in the course as a whole. However, by putting the arts and history in dialogue with one another they have developed a multilayered and sophisticated understanding of Hiroshima and Rwanda and their historical significance that would have been unlikely through approaches to the past usually associated with history. They have engaged in a generative dialogue between past, present and future. They have advanced and supported a personal interpretation of the periods under study. They have

come to raise new questions about lives past. What is more, they have begun to display the kind of genuine engagement and connection with the past that, as history educators, we are surely striving for.

We thank The Atlantic Philanthropies for their support of the research leading to this article. We thank our colleagues Howard Gardner, Steven McAlpine, Matthew Miller and Alison Rhodes for their productive ideas and help with interviews. We are especially grateful to Judi Freeman for many inspiring conversations and for giving us access to her classroom; we also thank her students for allowing us to conduct interviews and collect samples of their work.

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9. The year-long course is taught to students of ages 16 and 17. Five classes run concurrently. Students do not take the course for credit and are not externally examined at the end of the course. While the course is based on the curriculum and ideas of the international organization *Facing History and Ourselves*—who pioneered the monument project—Freeman has developed her own materials and content for the course. For more information about Freeman's course visit the class website at www.learntoquestion.com. For more information about the organization *Facing History and Ourselves* go to www.facinghistory.org
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