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Art is Powerful
Amy Herman Talks to AGTS
By Jeana Mastrangeli (Methacton)
Edited by Mary Fowles (Central Bucks)

*All of us appreciate Art Goes to School. So do the students we serve.
But how can we convince school administrators not to cut this wonderful program?*

Amy Herman, our May 4th virtual speaker, armed us with a plethora of answers. For 45 minutes we were treated to a fast-faced mini version of “The Art of Perception,” a course she developed to teach medical, military, law enforcement, and finance professionals the skills they need for effective job performance. Herman is an experienced art historian and a former attorney, and she deftly tailored highlights of her course to the AGTS audience. She does not teach art history; instead, she uses art as visual stimuli to cultivate people’s observational and articulation skills, sharpen critical thinking, and re-adjust original perceptions—the same skills we encourage in AGTS classrooms.

Herman explained her mantra, *The Four A’s*: Assess, Analyze, Articulate, and Adapt, by using art as visual stimuli. In fact, she displayed only visual images on her screen—no wordy PowerPoint slides, no bullet points—and took full advantage of the power of visual communication. Some of her strategies were familiar to AGTS volunteers, but she expanded on them in interesting ways and introduced fresh new ideas for using visual imagery to convey a meaningful concept. She tied each strategy to a key objective for us to keep in mind. Those key points are highlighted in bold below.

Sharpen our focus, change our lenses and perspectives to clear our vision. Listen to understand. On our screens, we stared at an out-of-focus nighttime cityscape with blurry lights and silhouettes (South African Philip Barlow’s *Electric Wet*, 2017). Then, to remind us that we see not only with our eyes, Herman showed Joshua Reynolds’ *Self-Portrait as a Deaf Man* (c. 1775), a painting of a man with his fingers cupped to his ears. Together, these two images visually reinforced Herman’s message about the importance of re-adjusting our usual perspective and listening carefully to other points of view.

Pay attention to details, but don’t forget to look at the big picture. Herman recounted a time when, at an art museum in Spain, she entered a room with an enormous metal sculpture of mirrors soldered together. Entranced, she approached to closely examine the mirrors, all the details and nuances, but it was not until she stepped back that she realized that the sculpture was a giant Venetian mask (Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos’ *I’ll be Your Mirror*, 2018). The lesson she wove into this narrative, that we need to consider both details and the overall work, is a good one for AGTS students!

No two people see anything the same. We perceive and prioritize information differently, and therefore we need to talk to each other and articulate clearly what we see. Herman showed us a black and white photo that seemed like an inkblot test. She said to raise our right hand and then lower it when could see a definite image. As she gave clues (e.g., it has four legs, it’s a mammal), hands started coming down. Some people saw a cow immediately, but others waited to see its outline. We perceived the same image in very different ways.

To push her point further, she showed a picture of a busy Rio de Janeiro street scene. A huge photograph of a woman’s face was pasted on the steps of a long staircase (the photo. was from street-artist JR’s project, *Women are Heroes*, 2008). We had to describe what we saw in one short sentence. Herman’s explained that her students’ responses varied greatly, ranging from specific descriptions of the city scene around the steps to the large photo on the steps. They saw the same image but described it differently. In AGTS, our children experience these lessons constantly!

Change the way you look at things, and things you look at will change. To see issues in an effective way, change your lens, change your perspective. We’re all familiar with the technique of turning an abstract painting upside down. Herman had us consider Arcimboldo’s *The Vegetable Gardener* (1587-1590) from different angles. Then she showed two photos of Notre Dame: a front view of the cathedral with fiery flames soaring overhead and an aerial view showing the scope of the damage. By juxtaposing these two familiar images of Notre Dame, Herman illustrated how to make an abstract concept much more vivid and immediate.

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Ask the right questions to elicit information to do the job, but also apply the Pertinent Negative concept—that is, notice what you do not see. To expand the teaching technique of using familiar images from life to anchor an abstract concept, Herman showed us René Magritte's surrealist *Time Transfixed* (1938). She described what was clearly in the picture (a steam engine emerging from a fireplace), and then she pointed out what was missing (no tracks under the train, no fire in the fireplace, no candles in the candlesticks). These missing details are pertinent to the picture, and they give a more accurate description of it.

Then Herman referenced an example of pertinent negation from World War II. B-29 bomber planes returned from battle severely damaged, riddled with bullet holes. The problem to solve was this: "Where should the Allies apply armor to minimize damage?" Defense officials wanted to reinforce places where the planes had been heavily assaulted. Instead, Abraham Wald, a mathematician, suggested that armor should be installed in areas without bullet holes. Had the planes been hit there, he argued, they might not have survived. Wald's awareness of the "pertinent negative" led to a successful solution: armor was installed only in the undamaged areas, and more planes survived.

Compare and contrast—but choose your words carefully. As we have experienced in AGTS classes, having students focus on similarities and differences teaches them better observational skills. Herman often uses this technique in her course to illustrate how to articulate ideas more effectively. She pairs Goya's *The Naked Maja* (c 1797-1800) and Lucian Freud's *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995). Both are paintings of two white reclining nude females. A psychiatrist in one of her classes asserted that Freud's woman was obese and unhealthy, whereas Goya's woman was healthy. Herman challenged his assumption, "How do you know that she is healthy? She might have a cancerous tumor growing in her intestines." She then gently reassured the psychiatrist that he was not wrong, that we just do not know whether she is healthy or not. Instead, his choice of language was poor. Without realizing it, we—and our students—often bring our own biases to our interpretations. As many of us know, one way to address that kind of bias is to ask: "What do you see that makes you say that?" This approach encourages students to carefully and precisely articulate their ideas, helps them to reflect, and then distinguish between inferences based on observable evidence and opinions based merely on feelings—a skill often stressed in state curriculum standards.

The entire presentation was also a stimulating art appreciation session. Herman upheld artists as role models, pointing out Picasso's remarkable **agility** as showcased by his myriad styles and use of multiple media and street artist JR's **shifted perspective** of self-portrait in a photo of himself taking a photograph reflected *In the Eye of a Woman* (2010). Her presentation was packed with phenomenal artwork. Here are some that titillated my AGTS soul:

- Japanese artist Kumi Yamashita's *Constellation -Mana no.2* (2013), which shows a girl's face created with a single, unbroken black thread wrapped around 10,000 nails on a wood panel and *Building Blocks* (2014), a silhouette of a women's profile cast by the shadow of scattered children's blocks, with light shining from a single source
- *Secret Sky* in Hume, Michigan, a dilapidated barn, re-envisioned by slicing a skinny triangle in a side wall to allow skylight to shine through
- Ghanaian sculptor, El Anatsui's *Gravity and Grace* (2010), a massive hanging sculpture sewn of flattened bottlecaps that looks different in every museum where it hangs
- Franz Marc's famous *The Tower of Blue Horses* (1913), which has been missing since 1945
- Rembrandt's *A Man in a Room* (1630), which depicts a man sitting in a dark room, reading from sunlight beams streaming from a window high on the wall above

Throughout Herman's lightning-fast, tightly packed lecture, she articulated the significant lessons and learning outcomes of many of our AGTS activities—all good arguments for keeping AGTS in the school curriculum. Furthermore, she showed us ways to align what we do with school administrators' academic goals—to cultivate observation, critical thinking, and communication skills. Herman's entertaining, fun-loving games and activities shifted our perceptions, and so it is in AGTS: we develop flexible and adaptable learners. Art can enhance cultural understanding and appreciation, feed cognitive growth, and enrich the soul. As Amy Herman stated, "Art is powerful!"

For more information, dig up "Fostering Visual Intelligence," in the AGTS winter 2018 newsletter, dive into Herman's book, *Visual Intelligence*, or enjoy a video on her www.artfulperception.com website.

Finally, I thank Methacton's detective Donna SanFelice for her support for in chasing down specific artworks, Terry Nicolo for her beautiful description of *Secret Sky*, and Mary Fowles for her superb editing skills that transformed my original into a better read.



2022-2023

Proposed Events/Dates

Monday, September 12, 2022:

AGTS-DV 60TH Anniversary Celebration
Philadelphia Masonic Temple
9:30am-1:30pm

This will also serve as our mandatory chapter chair meeting.
In-person



Tuesday, October 18, 2022:

Claire Brill: Virtual Interactive working studio
studio tour , presentation of Contemporary Fine
Mosaics and demonstration of a project
"Mysteries of Modern Mosaics"

10:00 am
Virtual lecture



Wednesday, November 9, 2022:

Networking
"Artful Thinking" by Suzannah Niepold
Philadelphia Museum of Art's Education Department
William Penn Inn

10:00 am
In-person



Wednesday January 18, 2023:

Jaan Troltenier : "Art and Being Human"
AGTS -DV West Chester member
Virtual lecture



Jaan Troltenier

March 2023: (proposed)

David Stier : Phillips Mill Community Association- artist
"Painting is meditation..."
Virtual lecture



May 2023: (proposed)

Nemours Mansion and Garden - Field Trip
In person



Wednesday, June 7, 2023:

Portfolio Exchange - Drive Thru
Life Storage
Eagleville, PA
In person



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Making Your Presentation Relevant to State Education Standards

by Maureen Moore, Norristown Chapter & Portfolio Committee

The academic standards for the arts and humanities describe what students should know and be able to do. This is the framework for art program/art teachers' lessons/curriculum. Both PA and NJ have similar standards. (www.pmea.net, www.state.nj.us)

So, how does AGTS enhance and make their presentation relevant to these standards?

As a retired art teacher, I can address this from personal experience. We always welcome the volunteers into our classrooms. AGTS enhanced my student's learning by providing a little art history that, as a classroom teacher, there was little time or little funding to adequately provide. Many students are unable to visit art museums, but AGTS brings the museum to the classroom. Each year my students looked forward to participating in the program and excitedly waited to see what each year's portfolio would contain.



Art teachers focus on students being able to draw, cut, color etc. We teach the elements (color, form/shape, line, space, texture and value) and principles (balance, contrast, emphasis/focal point, movement/rhythm, proportion/scale, repetition and unity/harmony) of art when teaching students how to DO art. AGTS presentations reinforce the elements and principles that they are learning by visually showing students artworks demonstrating these throughout history and from various geographical locations. Today we grab our cell phones to snap a selfie, but how did you get a portrait 200 years ago? What did these people wear, how did they get around, what were their jobs, how did they live, what were their beliefs? These are all addressed through AGTS presentations adding cross-curriculum elements to the lessons.

But what are the standards. As stated earlier both PA and NJ are similar. There are 4 basic categories. These are:

- 1) Production, performance and exhibition
- 2) Historical and Cultural Contexts
- 3) Critical Response
- 4) Aesthetic Response.

Art teachers emphasize the first one. AGTS enhances the last 3.

Using Phillip Surrey's Boulevard in the Rain, as an example, the AGTS presenter might point out that the position of the telephone poles gives depth to the composition, and that their reflections show that the road is wet. The students might be asked about the mood of the painting and their opinion of the color choices.

Visual arts education is a spatial art form that satisfies the human need to respond to life experiences through images, structures and tactile works. Each portfolio is designed to address varied art forms along with history, culture, technologies and elicit student participation in the program. Through discussion and observation pertaining to the works presented, students gain knowledge and confidence to voice their opinions. Students see powerful and varied ways of communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings through the images presented. Through interaction with the volunteers, students gain



MICHENER ART MUSEUM

Proud partner with the James A. Michener Art Museum since 1994. Each year, the James A. Michener Art Museum generously donates prints from their permanent collection along with curriculum materials and information on the artists for inclusion into our portfolios. There are currently 13 chapters who receive these works: Central Bucks, Council Rock, Pennsbury, Morrisville, Centennial in Bucks County; Upper Dublin, Lower Moreland, Norristown, Cheltenham, North Penn, Upper Moreland in Montgomery County; Northeast Philadelphia RSVP in Philadelphia County and Hunterdon County in New Jersey. Art Goes To School is so very grateful to the James A. Michener Art Museum for their years of largess! For more information about the Michener Art Museum please visit their website: www.michenerartmuseum.org

We Are the Portfolio Committee.
Maureen J Moore, AGTS PC Member and NASD Member

Do you know how a portfolio is born and how it evolves? Did you ever wonder why your portfolio contains the prints that it does? Why do you fill out a condition report and what happens to this report? Well, the Portfolio Committee (PC) spends time and energy addressing these matters.

As a former Art Teacher and now a member of the Portfolio Committee I have learned a great deal about what goes into the making and maintaining of portfolios. I had no idea. I joined Terry N, Terry M, Gail and Emily in October, 2019 and have come to enjoy the work and camaraderie. We have fun but get work done.

Here is what I learned and am still learning. Each portfolio is a carefully selected series of images that range from Ancient to Contemporary. There are still lifes, landscapes, portraits, photographs and sculpture/3D. There are culturally varied images addressing the diverse student population we see in schools. There are great masters, popular artists, illustrators, photographers, fiber artists, printmakers, muralists, action painters, male and female artists, African American, indigenous artists and many more.

The committee looks at each portfolio to select images that encompass the above criteria. Once an image is selected, we look at other portfolios in the rotation to make sure the image is not repeated for about 5 years. If an image is duplicated, an alternate is selected and the process is repeated so that each portfolio is unique. Yes, there may be times that there may be images in close proximity, but we are continually working on this. This work involves looking at other portfolios to "swap" prints, looking at the prints in storage or perhaps purchasing additional prints. Managing and maintaining portfolios is a never-ending task as each year many changes are required due to wear and tear of images and updating of the content. The committee is constantly looking for new images to add to the collection to keep the members and students excited. We are also in the process of creating new portfolios to replace those older ones in need of a major overhaul. With a limited budget, purchased images must be carefully researched to meet our criteria and cost. Once a print is purchased, it must be mounted, laminated and taped for its protection. Each new print costs between \$45-80.00.

Speaking of inventory, there are approximately 800 prints in portfolio circulation with an additional 500 prints in storage. There are also about 35 3D/sculptures that need proper packaging to make transport easy and safe. This year the committee has met several times at the storage unit to categorize and file each stored print according to its time period, genre, style and subject matter. We really used our muscles shifting and sorting these prints. We labeled the old portfolio cases for easier access and Gail created a working spreadsheet for inventory purposes. Several prints needed TLC. This includes taping edges with clear tape, cleaning and trimming prints in need, adding information envelopes to the back of new prints, removing the dreaded white tape, where possible, and making sure each print is in presentable condition. We also photographed each new print for addition to the AGTS database. There were times when we froze our toes off and other times that we were drenched with sweat. It is all worth it to see the progress we have made.

Once you have filled out the condition report...what happens next? Well, the committee looks at each and every one of these reports. This became easier with the implementation of DCRs (digital condition reports) which enable PC to scrutinize the DCRs virtually and assess what needs replacement or fixing (tlc) without having to meet to review papers. Working independently to address conditions, we select prints to replace and purchase, if needed, and then back to the storage unit to physically pull selected replacement prints for each portfolio. Purchased prints come from a variety of vendors, depending on what is available and cost. (This year there were prints from a vendor in England and the cost of shipping was saved as one of the PC members luckily had a trip to England planned, so these prints flew first class.)

These last two years have been challenging for everyone, PC included. We have had Zoom and Skype meetings, have met at various homes and have had many storage unit working meetings. Yet we have had fun.

One of the challenges arose for our first Covid exchange...how was this going to happen? Well, we pulled off the first curbside exchange at the storage unit...and it worked out great. Four of the five PC members live within just a few miles from the storage unit making this convenient as there were many portfolio replacements. We gathered the troops: husbands, children, grandchildren and friends. We created signs, schedules, maps and directions. As this was my first exchange, I feel it went smoothly. Our second Covid exchange at the storage unit was a partial exchange as only a few chapters wished to get a new portfolio. PC members even picked up old portfolios and delivered new ones to chapters unable to attend. These chapters were very grateful.

So, there you have it. Portfolios are serious business and PC considers each and every image that you present to your schools. As a retired art teacher, AGTS was a wonderful addition to my classes. I always scheduled AGTS during my birthday week as a present to myself. And now that I am on the Portfolio Committee, each time we meet to work on portfolios it's like opening a birthday present.

LOVE
Cindi Kimmel
Chair, Lititz Chapter

We could all use a little more LOVE right now in our lives. As we social distance, take a break and let's learn about one of the most inspiring Pop Art pieces of our time. This year, it was a favorite among the kids in our classes. LOVE is a large-scale sculpture installed in Love Park (JFK Plaza) in the middle of Philadelphia. The artist, Robert Indiana, created a simple bold graphic that is recognized world-wide.

The word LOVE is stacked in two rows with the "L" and "O" placed on top of the "V" and "E" like a clever package (or gift as we point out to the children). The jaunty angle of the "O" creates a playful break from the grid and its line leads directly to the "O". The younger children recognize the primary colors of red (on the exterior) and blue (on the interior) paint that cover its surface. This combination in the hand crafted letters by the artist create a highly visible and easy to read arrangement.

Indiana began exploring this love theme in the 1960s, working first on canvas and then in sculptural form. He chose this word for its cheerful meaning and also for the symmetry and balance. Indiana was known to cleverly play with words in his art. Words like EAT and HOPE became part of his many large mural and sculpture creations. Whether one interprets "LOVE" as a noun, a verb, or an imperative command, there is no confusion in its meaning. The simplicity of its message, paired with the simple composition, combine to create an icon of sculpture and graphic design. Maybe this is why the children LOVE this image!

The LOVE works are perhaps Indiana's most significant as they defined his career, bringing him to the attention of both the art world and the mainstream public yet, it also became a source of trouble for the artist as he never copyrighted the image. It all started in 1965 when he was commissioned to create a LOVE Christmas card for the MOMA. In 1970 the original LOVE sculpture was installed at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and in 1973 the US Postal Service released a LOVE stamp for Valentine's Day. In 1976, for the U.S. Bicentennial celebration, a 6' tall painted aluminum sculpture weighing 3,800 lbs. was brought to Philadelphia on loan from the artist. Two years later, Philadelphians became attached to this symbol of "brotherly love" and it was purchased by the city for \$35,000. Since then, the image has become internationally famous. There are over 50 LOVE sculptures installed in public places around the world in different languages. Indiana, however, did not receive many of the royalties the LOVE image has been associated with on mugs, T-shirts etc.

The children find it fascinating that the artist changed his last name to his hometown state of Indiana. We also show them a picture of another Philadelphia sculpture, the AMOR statue, created by the artist in 2015. The city asked Indiana to create a matching LOVE sculpture in Spanish to greet the Spanish speaking visiting Pope. The AMOR Statue was created in the same colors and style and is located not far from Love Park.

Today, the LOVE sculpture receives many visitors and is frequently photographed for Instagram and Snap Chat posts as a symbol of a visit to the city of Philadelphia. Many of the children recounted visits with their families or class trips and recognized the famous symbol created in ice at the local Lititz Fire & Ice Festival.





AKC MUSEUM OF THE DOG - "PAWSITIVELY" WONDERFUL!

Submitted by Amy Bash – Cherry Hill Chapter

When I first heard that the AKC Museum of the Dog was moving back to NYC, I couldn't wait to visit a destination that combines two of my greatest passions – art and dogs!

The AKC Museum of the Dog (MOD) displays one of the largest collections of canine-related art in the world*. Its purpose is to educate, provide historical perspective, aesthetic enjoyment and to enhance the appreciation for and knowledge of the significance of the dog and the human/canine relationship*. MOD offers Exhibitions, Interactive Experiences, a Permanent Collection, Events, a Library and Museum Store.

As I wandered through bright, modern galleries, I was captivated by paintings, sculptures, trophies, and sketches. Centuries old ceramics and artifacts help teach the evolution and domestication of dogs. I learned about breeds from around the world. I saw scenes of aristocratic households, rustic farms, cozy armchairs, and warm hearths. Dogs of all shapes and sizes were represented at rest, at work, at war, in service, at play, at competition, and as man's faithful companion and best friend.

Paintings especially moved me. A mother and her pups, an athletic retriever in his prime, the grey whiskers of a life well-lived, were all expressed through different mediums. It was as if I could feel the softness of fur and the sparkle of emotion and intellect in dogs' eyes - that's how expertly artists applied their paints. The loyal loving bond one has with their dog was ever so miraculously, skillfully captured on large scale and small canvases.

Lectures and special exhibits such as Hollywood Dogs, Presidential Dogs, and Top Dogs keep MOD experiences entertaining and educational for all ages. "Furry Fridays", are friendly hours when you can bring your dog to MOD! The Library is a hub featuring information on breeds, training, sport, guiding and comforting service, literature, and an activity center where visitors create art they can later post on a social media Community Wall.

As I think about AGTS, I've note that children perk up whenever a dog appears in art we discuss. They express how they feel about puppies, how they want to be a veterinarian and how they want a dog of their own. I imagine telling classes about a Museum devoted to dogs, encouraging them to draw/photograph their dog, to write a story about a dog in a painting and to enjoy crafts, games, puzzles from the MOD website.

No "bones" about it, this is a unique Museum. Whether you are a dog lover, art lover or believe art and dogs can "heal", I highly recommend visiting/virtually touring the AKC Museum of the Dog. Happy "tails" to you!

<https://museumofthedog.org/>

101 Park Ave, New York, NY 10178 212-696-8360

*Sources: American Kennel Club & AKC Museum of the Dog



THE FRICK MADISON- New Light on the Old Masters

by Lynn Larson, Lower Moreland

Exhibition driven, that's me, usually. Rarely do I visit a museum to view the permanent collection. Then, this happened- social media lit up with news of The Frick moving to Madison Ave. in New York last March of 2021, temporarily. Intriguing and inviting, I met a friend in the city on a moody Spring day to see this reimagining.

The Frick Collection closed in 2020 to renovate, restore, and rethink how it will curate the treasured collection of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts on display in Henry Clay Frick's Gilded Age mansion on East 70th street in New York City. Now, for the first time ever, the majority of the collection has been relocated to a temporary new home at the Breuer, the Brutalist building at 945 Madison Avenue and 74th Street, which was formerly the site of the Met Breuer, and previously the Whitney Museum of Art, which commissioned the building in 1966 by architect Marcel Breuer.

In the absence of the Frick's grand domestic setting, the works are cast in a different light that offers plenty of opportunity for new readings and insights. Instead of a setting flowing with intricate embroidery, rich gold-trimmed velvets, and dark polished mahogany, the works are surrounded by an abundance of stone and concrete, sharp lines, and modern geometric windows. The contrast is striking and unexpected on a purely visual level, but the enormous space and three levels gave the curators a unique opportunity for fresh ideas. The light and open space is brilliant. The modern architecture reminds me of the Barnes Foundation move to Philadelphia.

This part I love- the galleries are shown by date, by region, and by media. One gallery room showcases the entirety of the canvases by French Rococo master Jean-Honoré Fragonard, shown together for the first time in the institution's history. Four are hung in the exact way that they were envisioned by the artist when they were commissioned by Louis XV's mistress, Madame du Barry. Even the size of the room at the Breuer is about the same as their intended home outside of Paris at Versailles, but instead of the French landscape out the window, the energy of Madison Avenue traffic, pedestrian and auto, zips by. The British art collection is presented together at Frick Madison for the first time. Seven canvases by Gainsborough, for example, are shown alongside portraits by Hogarth, Lawrence, Reynolds, and Romney, representing almost 100 years of British portraiture. Their presence embraces the room. One of the most important Renaissance paintings in the country, Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert, receives the sacred treatment it deserves. The painting is presented, with solitary reserve, in a quiet room on the third floor. The display allows for a tranquil, churchlike moment of reflection of Breuer's architecture, with the natural light from the window nearby providing a real-life comparison to the divine light in the painting.

Sculpture is in the spotlight, too. Perceived as merely decorative at the mansion, here, the works are given center stage. The Barbet Angel, a large-scale 15th-century bronze, seeks attention in its own room, where it can be admired from all angles. Curated beautifully, a floor-to-ceiling display of porcelain is organized by color, rather than by origin or date. I thought this presentation defined the lines and textures so well I noticed the subtle details often missed.

Like a moth to a flame- I was drawn to many wondrous original paintings where the reproductions can be found in AGTS' thoughtfully curated portfolios, and in some cases, the coveted supplements. A few I even presented to students- Gainsborough, Reynolds, Turner, Whistler, van Dyck, Corot, Boucher, Ingres, and de La Tour. This Spring, February through May of 2022, many Whistler's from The Frick are on exhibition loan to the Musee d'Orsay in Paris.

The Frick's website is an excellent resource with detailed information on the artists and their work, including images of the art and current visuals of the rooms.

The Frick Madison is open Thursday-Sunday 10:00-6:00.

Ticket prices and info: www.frick.org



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“THE DIG” a Netflix movie on the extraordinary Sutton Hoo discovery

a movie review by Lynn Larson, Lower Moreland

During the past year, I watched more television than usual, looking for an art history film with an exceptional story- “The Dig” (1h 52m) is one I adored in its simplicity, visuals, actors and subject. The movie, released in January of 2021, also renewed interest in the Sutton Hoo discovery as well as attendance at the British Museum, where the historic collection is exhibited.



For more than a thousand years, burial mounds lay untouched on the Suffolk landscape in the English countryside. In 1939, the landowner of the estate on which these mounds sat, Edith Pretty, commissioned an archaeological team to find out what, if anything, was buried beneath. Was it just folklore? Her instincts drove the need to find out. Edith has a nine-year-old son, Robert, anticipating with great excitement all the activity. The students we serve love a great story during presentations- this could be one. Imagine if this tale, this discovery, were in their backyard or nearby!

What they found is now known as The Sutton Hoo Burial Site, an extraordinary archaeological discovery as significant as Tutankhamun's Tomb or the Terracotta Warriors. It was revealed to be a large, intact burial ship with a haul of Anglo-Saxon artifacts and treasures dating

back to the 5th century. Contained within- Byzantine silverware, gold jewels and accessories set with Sri Lankan garnets, tools, swords, armor, gold coins, and the iconic iron mask. Speculation is that the extravagant arrangements were for someone as important as a king. The discovery also up-ended then-conventional wisdom about culture in the Dark Ages. There was! And it was all uncovered by Basil Brown, an excavator, someone without a university degree or so-called qualifications yet with strong instincts.

The drama of that discovery is immortalized in The Dig, a gorgeously shot Netflix film starring Carey Mulligan and Ralph Fiennes. The Dig is a film that really benefits from the performances from Mulligan and Fiennes, their presence and talent elevating it from a run-of-the-mill historical drama to one with a delicate balance that avoids extra sentimentality.

As Basil Brown, the only recently credited initial discoverer of the Sutton Hoo site, Fiennes brings to life the archaeologist/excavator's considered approach to his work, especially in a field dominated by establishment figures who looked down on someone of Brown's stature. There are class tensions with the British Museum experts who blow in once it's apparent how significant the find is, but The Dig doesn't overplay any antagonism.

The Dig is much more interested in how the discovery of this burial site resonates with its characters, particularly Edith who was widowed not long ago. Mulligan plays the role with reserve and dignified humanity.

Adapted from a novel by John Preston, The Dig cleverly parallels the weight of the burial site excavation with Edith's emotional struggles in trying to cope with her own failing health. The omens of death or impending doom are heightened by the World War II preparations that surround them, the RAF fighter plane engines heard overhead the dig site almost daily and the knowledge that young men will leave and never return.

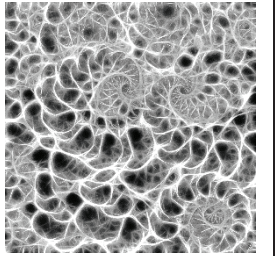
The Dig is concerned with not death but legacy, what's left behind when we're no longer here, explored through whether Brown will be deservedly acknowledged or Edith's acceptance of her mortality. Ultimately, the elegance in The Dig lies in what it says about the continuity of life rather than the finality of death.



Painting with Pixels

by Gail Wellington, Spring-Ford Chapter

Throughout the centuries artists have found new ways to create fine art, so it should come as no surprise that electronic means have been developed. The first were computer generated, that is someone wrote a program that arranged the pixels on the screen in an artistic way often based on fractals or Mandelbrot sets. (The picture to the right is fractal art called “Berry Delight by Tanya Hall.) These geometric or mathematical designs as art were limited by the computer resolution and the printer capabilities. In the 1980's paint programs were developed but the same limitations applied. It is only in the past few decades that the technology has been refined to the point where it is difficult to tell digitally created art from brush paintings.



The digital animations created by Pixar Studios are familiar and although amazing, most would not consider them fine art. There are artists using computer painting that do create works that would qualify. British Artist Mathew Gibson's landscapes look like watercolors. (<https://pixels.com/featured/4-digital-watercolor-painting-of-beautiful-landscape-image-of-syca-matthew-gibson.html>). Californian Alex Ruiz has created a body of work that resemble acrylic paintings and that would qualify as fine art. (www.alexruiz.art) Ruiz' career has been in film, TV, animation, video games, and commercials.



I asked local digital artist Tia Roher of Iris Semp to explain her technique and tools. “Dream Walk”, she created with the software program, Art Rage on a screen tablet. Every paintbrush stroke was done by hand. Art Rage gave her the ability to color and to mix paints. She was able to fuse colors and textures in the work.



For unique colors and textures in the work, she uses digital algorithms that can create combinations of colors and textures with properties of each in various proportions. This enables unique results. The picture to the left shows the menus for the software tools and illustrates and brush strokes.

Roher, who fondly remembers seeing Art Goes to School presentations, creates characters for computer games and fine art pieces such as this, on commission. (“Dream Walk” is an outdoor installation in Royersford, Pennsylvania, at Ram's Rest in the arboretum behind the Spring-Ford 9th Grade Center. Roher chose to work digitally and to have the 6 x 4 foot work printed on vinyl so that it would withstand the weather.)

The AGTS portfolio committee hopes to introduce digitally created works into the portfolios as budget permits. These will be of interest to today's computer-literate students.

