

GRASS ROOTS: AFRICAN ORIGINS OF AN AMERICAN ART
HIST. 210.001 AND ARTM. 360.001
Dale Rosengarten

SYLLABUS – FALL 2008

Tuesday/Thursday, 10:50 am – 12:05 pm

All classes will meet in Stern Center 201, unless otherwise noted.

Site visits highlighted in bold.

August 2008

- 26 Introduction: What does studying basket traditions teach us about African and American history?
Assignment for next class: Read *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, “Introduction” by Theodore Rosengarten, and Chapter 1 – Dale Rosengarten and Enid Schildkrout, “African Origins: Ancestors and Analogues.” Prepare questions for the authors based on this material.
- 28 Guest speakers: Enid Schildkrout, Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions of the Museum for African Art; Theodore Rosengarten, Co-editor of *Grass Roots*
Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 3 – Judith A. Carney, “Rice in the New World”; Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, pp. 8–32, 74–114.

September

- 2 **Site visit #1: “Grass Roots” exhibition at the Gibbes Museum of Art**
Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 2 – Peter H. Wood, “They Understand Their Business Well: West Africans in Early South Carolina.”
- 4 Guest speaker: Peter H. Wood, Professor Emeritus, Duke University
Assignment: Read Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture*. Visit The Old Slave Mart Museum on Chalmers Street and write a two-page site assessment of the core exhibit (due Sept. 11).
- 9 Discussion (**Addlestone 227**): The Atlantic slave trade and the evolution of African American culture
Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 4 – Dale Rosengarten, “By the Rivers of Babylon: The Lowcountry Basket in Slavery and Freedom,” and selected primary sources such as excerpts from Samuel Gamble’s journal (1793–94), rice plantation documents, WPA oral histories.
- 11 Discussion: Life and labor on Lowcountry rice plantations
Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 8 – John M. Vlach, “Documentary Images and Devotional Acts: Plantation Painting as Propaganda”; and Angela Mack and

Stephen Hoffius (eds.), *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, pp. 1–15, 58–85, 115–39.

- 16 **Site visit #2: “Grass Roots” at the Gibbes – presentation by the museum’s Chief Curator Angela Mack on the Lowcountry basket in the art of the Charleston Renaissance**
 Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 5 – Jessica Harris, “Carolina’s Gold: Three Hundred Years of Rice and Recipes in Lowcountry Kitchens.” Write a two-page essay (due Sept. 25) comparing what you have learned about Carolina rice plantations from documentary research and from the visual representations of artists and the interpretations of art historians.
- 18 Discussion: The ethnography of food. Term project assignments (due Dec. 2) will be handed out.
 Assignment: Identify a rice dish indigenous to a particular culture; research the ethnic origins of the recipe and, if relevant, its diaspora history. Make the dish and bring it to class on Sept. 23—enough to give everyone a taste.
- 23 Rice around the world: students present the dishes they prepared and describe where the recipes originated and what they reveal about the land and culture of their place of origin.
 Assignment: Visit the permanent Lowcountry history gallery at The Charleston Museum and write a two-page analysis of the exhibition (due Sept. 30).
- 25 Guest speaker: Richard Porcher, biologist and historian of the technology of Lowcountry rice plantations, Professor Emeritus, The Citadel
 Assignment: Review the online exhibitions and websites listed on the handout of Internet resources. Choose one that interests you and be prepared to discuss its contents, usefulness, and aesthetic qualities.
- 30 Student presentations: Relating objects, images, and texts
 Assignment: Read and compare Judith Carney, *Black Rice* (2001), pp. 1–30, 69–106, with David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, “Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas,” *American Historical Review* (December 2007). Write a two-page defense of one side or the other in the dispute between Carney and her critics (due Oct. 2).

October

- 2 View and discuss the video *When Rice Was King*.
 Assignment: Read Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), pp. 1–49. Write a brief review of *When Rice Was King* (due Oct. 7). What information did you learn that supplements the course readings? What was the point of view of the videographer? Do you find documentary film an effective means of teaching about the past?

- 7 Midterm review: PowerPoint presentation of objects and images from the “Grass Roots” exhibition. Term project proposals due.
- 9 Midterm exam
- 14 Fall Break – NO CLASS
- 16 PowerPoint presentation (**Stern Center 206**) on the impact of Penn School’s program of “industrial education” on St. Helena Island and the rise of sweetgrass basket making in Mt. Pleasant
 Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 6 – Dale Rosengarten, “Missions and Markets: Sea Island Basketry and the Sweetgrass Revolution.” In a two-page essay, contrast the two movements described in this chapter—one self-consciously conservationist and the other decidedly entrepreneurial.
- 21 View and discuss the video *Grass Roots: The Enduring Art of the Lowcountry Basket*
 Write a review of the video (due Oct. 28), as if for publication. Analyze the content and structure of the film. What are its strengths and weaknesses? What does the video convey that an exhibition or book can not? Predict the impact of the film on different audiences—local and national, young and old, black and white, etc.
- 23 **Site visit #3: “Grass Roots” at the Gibbes with Karen Chandler, professor of Arts Management, College of Charleston, and Zinnia Willits, the museum’s registrar**
 Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 7 – Sandra Klopper, “Necessity and Invention: The Art of Coiled Basketry in Southern Africa”; Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, Chapter 1 – “Objects and agendas: re-collecting the Congo” in *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (1998), pp. 1–36.
- 28 Discussion: Ancient arts in the modern world
 Assignment: Read Anthony B. Cunningham and M. Elizabeth Terry, *African Basketry: Grassroots Art from Southern Africa* (2006), pp. 14–43; Sónia Silva, *Time for Baskets* (2003), pp. 134–54.
- 30 View and discuss the video *Bin Ya: There’s No Place Like Home* (2008)
 Assignment: Read Patricia Jones Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (1987), pp. ix–xviii, 132–49; and Joyce V. Coakley, *Sweetgrass Baskets and the Gullah Tradition* (2006).

November

- 4 Guest speakers: Nakia Wigfall, sweetgrass basket maker, and Thomasena Stokes-Marshall, Mt. Pleasant Town Councilor
 Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 8 – Fath Davis Ruffins, “The Paradox of Preservation: Gullah Language, Culture, and Imagery.”

- 6 Guest Speaker: Fath Davis Ruffins, curator of African American History and Culture at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Assignment: Research one of the documentary efforts cited in Ruffins’s essay, “The Paradox of Preservation,” and write a two-page critique describing the intent of the artist/activist, the qualities of the work, and its impact on popular perceptions (due Nov. 11).
- 11 **Site visit #4: Avery Research Center – Deborah Wright, archivist and project coordinator of Lowcountry Heritage Itineraries**
Assignment: Read National Park Service, *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study* (2005), available in print and online.
- 13 Discussion: The politics of heritage tourism
Assignment: Watch *Family Across the Sea* (1989) or *Home Across the Water* (1993) or *God’s Gonna Trouble the Water* (1997). In a two-page review (due Nov. 18), discuss what the videographers hoped to achieve and how successful they were in creating an effective film.
- 18 Discussion: The promises and pitfalls of media and technology
Assignment: Read *Grass Roots*, Chapter 9 – J. Lorand Martory, “Islands Are Not Isolated: Reconsidering the Roots of Gullah Distinctiveness.” Write a brief comparison of the NPS *Gullah Culture Special Resource Study* with “Islands Are Not Isolated” and prepare questions to ask Michael Allen during class on Nov. 20.
- 20 Guest speaker: Michael Allen, National Park Service education coordinator and historian of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor
First drafts of term projects due.
- 25 **Site visit #5: “Grass Roots” at the Gibbes**
Assignment: Write a two-page analysis of one section of the exhibition, describing in detail the objects, display techniques, labels, lighting, etc. What do *images* and *things* tell you about history and the human spirit that mere words do not?
- 27 Thanksgiving holiday – NO CLASS

December

- 2 Term project presentations
- 4 Term project presentations (**Addlestone 227**)
- 9 Reading Day – Pick up graded term projects

Class Requirements: Students are expected to do the required reading and come to class prepared to discuss weekly assignments. Besides participating in discussions and field trips and handing in written assignments on time, each student will complete a documentary project, involving the design, research, and production of a 10- to 15-page term paper on some aspect of African-American material culture. The paper will include a statement of purpose, discussion of methodology and results of research, illustrations or photocopies of primary sources, and a bibliography of works cited. Besides the written paper, students will present the documentary material they have assembled in a PowerPoint, video, or photo display.

Grading criteria: Class participation: 25% (includes attendance and active involvement in class discussions)
Written assignments: 25% (punctuality does count!)
Midterm exam: 20%
Term project: 30%

Academic misconduct: The Honor Code of the College of Charleston forbids cheating and plagiarism (knowingly using someone else's ideas without proper acknowledgment or copying work from any source, including the Internet). A student found guilty of these offenses will receive a failing grade in the course. Additional penalties may include suspension or expulsion from the College at the discretion of the Honor Board. See the College of Charleston Student Handbook for definitions of these offenses.