

# #arthistory: Instagram and the Intro to Art History Course

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Assignment

From museum selfies to the digital humanities **instagram** has become a major force in the art world. Artists now cultivate ‘instagram practices’, art institutions have thousands of followers, and hashtags like ‘#monalisa’ have over 200,000 entries. The majority of these posts are contributed by people in their late-teens and twenties — the age demographic that dominates instagram — and yet the app is more likely to be banned from college classrooms than encouraged.<sup>[1]</sup> In a period when educators are grappling with divergences between social media-driven forms of communication and academic communication, instagram, at least in the context of art history, has potential to both enrich content and strengthen the discipline’s relevance for contemporary learners.

Those of us who have taught **jumbo survey courses** quickly learn to engage initially disinterested students by connecting historic works and themes to their own lived experiences. I’ve shown images of David Beckham in underwear when talking about classical ideals, Obama campaign posters to introduce a unit on representations of power, even showed a clip from *Ancient Aliens* in acquiescence to a students’ incessant allusions to the TV show.

By introducing these references in class, I aim not only to make art history relevant to my students' lives, but also to equip them to apply the analytic and critical tools cultivated in art history to their surroundings. In this post, I want to propose that **instagram can serve as a platform** for encouraging students to connect buildings, objects, and images from their contemporary environment to historic structures and works. As a pedagogical tool instagram can help teachers can build visual thinking skills, foster comparative aptitude, and encourage original analysis.

After recently collaborating with an artist to design and lead an instagram-based project for high school art classes, I began to think about what an Intro to Art History instagram assignments could look like. My musings and research resulted in the following assignment draft. I designed this assignment for a thematic unit class, but it could easily be tailored to a chronological survey.

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## **Instagram Assignment**

### **PART 1: Posting Images**

Using Instagram: Each student must create his or her own instagram account or use an existing personal account. (Students without smartphones or tablets will be asked to do a paper version of this project, as further explained below.)

For each thematic unit, students will be required to submit at least 3 posts of buildings, objects, or images from their contemporary environment that compare to the historic works that we discuss in class and/or readings. Each post must be labeled '#arth100\_section1 #lastname\_firstname' For each post, students must also include a comment indicating which historic work their post connects to. All three posts must be submitted by the first day of the following unit. [Students without smart phones or access to digital cameras can view their classmates posts on a computer on [instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com)]

Alternative for students without smartphones or tablets:

Students without access to a device that can post to instagram can do a clippings version of this assignment. Rather than take photos, these students will be required to bring in images of contemporary buildings, objects, etc. that they have cut from magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and other print media that connect to historic works. These will be due in

class on the first day of the new unit. Students doing this alternative assignment will also be asked to scan and save digital copies of these images, so that they can refer back to them for Parts 2 and 3.

Example comparisons:

- The arch at Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn cf. The Arch of Titus
- The Woolworth Building cf. Chartres Cathedral
- A contemporary fashion advertisement cf. a Hannah Höch collage

## **PART 2: COMPARISON ESSAYS**

Students will learn how to write visual analysis comparisons during Unit 1. The instructor will select strong comparisons from students' posts to use as the subjects for low stakes in-class practice comparisons.

For each of the three following units students will turn in a 2-page visual analysis comparison essay based on one of their posts from that unit. The essay must compare and contrast the contemporary post to the historic work using the writing guidelines established during Unit 1.

## **PART 3: FINAL PAPER**

Students will chose one of their Comparison Essays to expand into a formal 5-7 page essay that compares the two subjects visually and contextually.

In addressing context, students should consider the following questions:

Why might the contemporary architect, artist, designer, image-maker, advertiser, etc. be referencing the historic work (deliberately or not)? Do the historic object and the contemporary object share function or meaning? Why?

By requiring students to build on their instagram posts through written analyses, Parts 2 and 3 of the assignment reinforce the connections made in Part 1 and further encourage original analysis (as well as **discourage plagiarism.**) They also strengthen visual and contextual analytic skills while directly demonstrating how these skills apply to the contemporary environment. I have not yet had the chance to test this assignment in the classroom, and it will surely present some glitches, as is always the case when introducing new technologies and media into the classroom, but it will also give students permission to turn the art historical lens outwards and to view their surroundings with an informed, critical, and creative eyes.

[1] For more on instagram demographics see: “The Demographics of Instagram and Snapchat Users,” on <http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/online/the-demographics-of-instagram-and-snapchat-users-37745/>.

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**12 RESPONSES TO “#ARTHISTORY: INSTAGRAM AND THE INTRO TO ART HISTORY COURSE”**

<sup>1</sup>jennball says:  
June 25, 2014 at 9:46 am  
  
Love this idea Hallie – and I can think of lots of ways to adjust it to my own classes – Thanks for posting!  
  
Reply