

Reconstructing Antiquity: Alternative Research Projects in Classical Art and Archaeology

Like most historians of classical art, I incorporate art, archaeology, history, and literature into my teaching. However, it can be a struggle to bring an appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of ancient art and archaeology to a classroom of mostly art students, especially when success is measured primarily through the traditional research paper assignment. This presentation focuses on recent projects, informed by digital humanities and experimental archaeology, that ask students to combine research and scholarly inquiry with the process of creating while maintaining the academic rigor expected in upper-division coursework.

In the spring of 2016, I included an architectural reconstruction project in my Greek and Hellenistic Art course. Students were asked to choose from a list of ancient buildings and create a reconstruction using digital modeling software or more traditional means, such as drawing. The goals of this project were to help students think in three dimensions by reconstructing a building from a plan and apply research skills toward achieving a tangible result. In order to successfully complete the project, students had to research archaeological remains, ancient texts, and archaeological and art historical scholarship in order to understand ancient building materials and techniques, proportions of architectural elements, and appropriate decorative features. Along with the reconstruction, each student submitted a bibliography and a short paper explaining and justifying the process and resulting reconstruction. This project was required in addition to a research paper, and students were allowed to use the reconstruction as the basis of the research paper, if desired.

Following the success of this pilot project, I incorporated a similar but more intensive variation into Art of Roman Cities: Pompeii to Palmyra, a course I designed for the Fall of 2016. In this course, students are given the option of writing a traditional research paper or

reconstructing a Roman building, object, product, or environment by combining research with appropriate materials or software. At the end of the semester, student work will be evaluated according to the rubric standards, which assess not only the reconstruction itself, but also the depth and breadth of research and quality of writing in the accompanying explanatory text. Furthermore, students will assess via an anonymous questionnaire how the project contributed to their learning. This information will help me evaluate the success of the project and its pedagogical merits as well as refine it for use in the future.

I am in the early stages of incorporating digital humanities and reconstruction into my courses and therefore lack long-term data on the success of these assignments, but I believe that this broader view of the research project will help improve essential writing and research skills while incorporating more current approaches to study of the ancient world. Through emphasis on the intellectual and practical value of the skills learned through study of the humanities, I hope students will understand ancient art history as a process through which we seek questions and answers in a variety of ways.