

*Book Review***The Role of the Arts in Extending and Challenging the Boundaries of History Education:
A Review of P. Clark & A. Sears (2020). *The Arts and the Teaching of History*****Avner Segall**

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avner@msu.edu**Book Title:** The Arts and the Teaching of History: Historical F(r)ictions**Authors:** Penney Clark & Alan Sears**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan**ISBN:** 978-3-030-51513-3 **Pages:** 297 **Year:** 2020

As those of us in the area of history education well know, though often find it convenient to forget, students—actually, most of us—learn just as much about the past from the arts than from sources normally used in the history classroom. Indeed, we probably learn more, and more powerfully, for example, about the French Rebellion of 1832 from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (or its contemporary musical or cinematic versions) or about the Spanish Civil War from Picasso’s *Guernica* than what is taught in school. Similarly, the spirit of the Renaissance and its ideas are more viscerally conveyed—and are impressed upon us in more meaningful and evocative ways—through the paintings and frescoes of Michelangelo, Raphael, Ghirlandaio, and Gozzoli (especially his *Procession of the Magi* in Florence’s Palazzo Medici Riccardi), in the statues of Donatello, or through the clean, rational lines of the architecture of Brunelleschi, than a textbook or classroom lecture ever could.

And yet, as teachers, we still, too often, tend to ignore or devalue the significant pedagogical power of these artistic forms and their ability to invoke insight into the past and its people, ones that resonates with us, that invite us to understand, identify, empathize, and wonder. When we do include aesthetic texts in the curriculum, we often do so to highlight their otherness from history—their fictive nature and historical inaccuracy—and, thus, dismiss or “correct” them.

There is, it seems, a prevailing assumption among many history educators, as Terrie Epstein (1994a) noted, “that when secondary students encounter the arts in historical contexts, they partake in educational activities that at worst represent a descent into frill or fantasy or at best promote the cultivation of creative, but not academically credible, thoughts or experiences” (p. 174). Regrettably, as my own visits to history classrooms indicate, not much has changed in that regard since Epstein wrote this more than a quarter of a century ago.

This is not to suggest that the role of the arts—and the promotion of using the arts in history classrooms—has not been explored in the academic literature. In fact, in the last three

decades, a number of scholars have looked into the ways in which the arts can serve as important teaching tools for engaging students in historical inquiry. Researchers have argued that art, in some cases a particular genre or medium of art, can be a powerful pedagogical vehicle to engage students in the process of historical inquiry and to develop their historical thinking (e.g., Barton, 2001; Christensen, 2006; Crawford, Hicks, & Doherty, 2010; Desai et. al., 2010; Epstein, 1994a, 1994b; Foster et. al., 1999; Gabella, 1991; Levstik, 1990; Marcus & Levin, 2010; Singer-Gabella 1996, 1998; Suh, 2013; Suh & Grant, 2014; Trofanenko, 2009). While this work explores multiple aspects of the role the arts play to promote historical understanding in classrooms and beyond, it only, by and large, affords a limited exploration of the role and use of the arts in or as history education.

Enter *The Arts and the Teaching of History: Historical F(r)ictions*, a recently co-authored book by Penney Clark and Alan Sears (2020, Palgrave Macmillan). This significant and timely volume does an outstanding job discussing and, through that discussion, re-orienting our attention to the important relationship between history and the arts and the potential uses we might make of the arts in history education—not instead of “proper” history education but as an integral part of it. In that, this well-researched and, at the same time, very accessible book makes a significant contribution to the history education literature for academics and practitioners alike. Innovative and focused this thoughtful book travels within and across disciplinary boundaries. Theoretically rich, and accompanied by detailed explorations of a variety of aesthetics texts—from fiction to paintings to statues to memorials and commemorative sites—the book’s two authors build upon a robust literature in history, philosophy of history, historiography, literary/aesthetic theory, and history education. The result provides a nuanced exploration of how we come to know the past through the arts and, through that lens, what a more inclusive notion of historical understandings might mean and entail.

But before I get to further discuss the qualities of this book, there is a broader question that should be asked, not necessarily of the book itself but of the field more broadly: Why do we need a book that reminds us of the importance of incorporating the arts into history education? Or, more precisely, are the arts and history in fact two separate domains and, if so, why were they separated in the first place?

The imperative to distinguish between history and the arts, between discovery and creation, truth and fiction, is, in many ways, a modern preoccupation—some would suggest, an obsession. But this was not always so. As we know, discussions about the difficulty to differentiate record from story, fact from theory or fiction, and the appropriate degrees to which historians negotiate the probable from the possible reach back to Ancient Greece, where Memory (Mnemosyne), the goddess of artistic inspiration, as Hamilton (1996) reminds us, was the mother of all Greek Muses, and the leading muse, Clio, presided over history (p. 9). Though the period did produce Herodotus, known as the “Father of History,” who emphasized the importance of evidence over fancy (though he, too, admitted to embellishing his accounts with the latter), History—or, in the case of Ancient Greece, stories about the past—was primarily conveyed, orally and visually, to the public through the arts: poetry, drama, statues, and images (e.g., on pottery).

For centuries to follow, people across Europe learned about the past through the arts. Without bibles or history books in everyone's possession, secular and religious histories were taught through stained glass windows, frescoes and paintings in churches or monuments, statues and reliefs in the public square. These artistic material forms all acted (and still act) as powerful, enduring teachers of history and citizenship, conveying lessons about history, power, governance and civic duty. The prevalence of these public art forms, whose purpose was as much pedagogical as aesthetic, reminds us that the past is not, and never was, the sole domain of written history as we know it today; that history education occurred, and still occurs, primarily in the public sphere—constituting a true public education—outside of the pages of history books and beyond classroom walls.

Even as late as the early nineteenth century, as philosopher of history Hayden White (1978) points out, and as Clark and Sears highlight, the division between history and story, between historian, poet, and philosopher, and between art and science was blurred. It was only since the second half of the 19th-century, when history, along with other scholarly areas, established itself as a distinct discipline, that history increasingly separated itself from art and, by affiliating itself with "science," progressively disassociated itself from philosophy and the arts and became "the refuge of those 'sane' men who excel at finding the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange" (White, 1978, p. 50). This is when facts became a priority, serving the double role of evidence and guarantor. With that, history assumed the mantle of the sanctioned creator, keeper, and disseminator of the official historical record and established new parameters for what does and does not count as "proper" history. With facts and objectivity becoming the currency of the modern discipline of history, the arts became alien, no longer considered a legitimate part of the endeavor.

But while history as a discipline may wish to discount the arts, it can't count them out. That we today continue to flock to art museums and galleries in increasing numbers and still regularly encounter historical monuments and statues in our urban space, visit heritage sites, and read historical novels, might give some indication that, despite the disciplining functions of history as a discipline, the arts remain important educators of the past, regardless of whether "proper" history does or does not approve of them as acceptable records by its own standards.

Why the Arts in History Education?

As Clark and Sears note, this is because our learning about (and in) the world—past or present—does not begin or end in the history classroom's cognitive didactic engagements. Indeed, not all we know about the past takes the form of purportedly non-fiction, expository language. Our thinking and understanding are equally—if not more substantively—derive from the kind of signs, symbols, icons and images that comprise the figurative language of the arts. The arts are affective, evoke emotion and imagination (Dewey, 1934; Tolstoy, 1897), and "teach students to act and to judge in the absence of rule, to rely on feel, to pay attention to nuance" (Eisner, 2002, p. 9). While history (impossibly, I might add) seeks the truth, the arts, through their own truth-telling, to use essayist André Aciman (2021), invite "its surrogate, insight—insight into people, into things, into the machinations of life itself" and into history itself "because insight goes after the deeper truth, because insight is insidious and steals into the soul of things ..." (p. 83). As we attempt to understand ourselves and the world, art, Aciman adds, "is

not about things but about the interrogation, the remembrance, the interpretation, perhaps even the distortion of things Art sees footprints, not feet, luster, not light, hears resonance, not sound” (p. 73).

“Encounters with the arts invite students to question and to wonder,” suggested Maxine Greene (1991). They invite us to feel and to think—an important conjuring because we most often feel before we think, and our ensuing thinking is constructed by and develops through those feelings—prodding us beyond acquiescence, suggesting other ways of thinking and being and pondering what it might mean to actualize them (p. 27). Works of art, Moon et. al., (2013) add, “possess the potential to simultaneously serve as a portal to another view of the world and also a looking glass that reflects the troubles of our own” (p. 232. See also Greene 1978).

Unlike the common expository history texts, the language of aesthetic texts, Epstein (1994a) reminds us, “functions connotatively as well as denotatively; figuratively as well as literally; symbolically, metaphorically, or allegorically, as well as logically and analytically” (p. 175). Tapping into the affective domain by incorporating the language of feeling into their interpretation of works of art, she adds, students often display “dimensions of depth and wisdom” that are absent from discussions of expository texts (p. 176). Indeed, Epstein’s study of the use of the arts in history education illustrated that “When the arts are well integrated into the history curriculum, when teachers and students alike believe historical knowledge can be conceptualized [as having] qualities other than literal or abstract explanations or assertions and reasoned arguments about primary causes or consequences, and when students feel safe to conjecture about concepts as close to the heart as human motivation and emotion,” students can “construct rich and fundamentally human historical understandings” (p. 191).

To be sure, none the issues discussed above—from the purposes and benefits of integrating the arts into history education to the inescapable nature of history as an artistic, creative endeavor that, like art, is humanly constructed, authored, and made rather than found—escape the purview of the authors of *The arts and the teaching of history: Historical f(r)ictions*. These and other topics, including those of power, diversity, nationhood, or the kind of citizenship engagements with the arts can foster, serve as both the foundation and impetus for the book. The authors take up these issues as if engaging the reader in a spiral curriculum to engage with a number of conceptual and pedagogical conversations currently taking place within the field of history education.

An Invitation to Expand Learning: The Structure and Order of the Book

Throughout the book, Clark and Sears make a compelling case for engaging the arts as powerful pedagogical means to broaden the range of accounts about the past students’ encounter in the classroom. Doing so they argue helps students towards a more complex set of understandings about the nature of truth in history telling and its relation to evidence, perspective, genre, and forms of expression. They propose that the arts, especially in the case of novels, tend to personalise the past and evoke interest, emotion and empathy, exposing students to different perspectives and invite them “to connect with people and events from the past in ways and at levels that are not available in the historical accounts they read in textbooks and other sources or by simply consulting the historical record” (p. 15). These and other arguments

about the benefit of meaningfully using the arts in the history classroom to advance students' historical understandings are continuously well-contextualized throughout the book's seven chapters in conversation with other, broader, discussions about the nature of history and the purposes of history education.

The book's first, introductory chapter, develops the above ideas by examining, and historicizing, the idea of history as a creative endeavor and of the role of the arts as conveyors of history. *Chapter Two*, address five prevalent scholarly conversations about the nature of history and historical truths, history and the arts, collective memory and historical consciousness, and Indigenous perspectives in history education, as well as their implications for history education and, particularly, how these conversations serve as the foundation for integrating the arts in history classrooms.

In *Chapter Three*, the authors use multiple examples of well-known novels to examine the use of fiction in the history classroom, distinguishing between two kinds of historical fiction: period novels (novels written in a particular time about that time) and historical novels (which are written about an earlier time). Each, the authors suggest, should be approached differently in the classroom if they are to be used effectively as accounts about the past. *Chapter Four* explores the purpose and place of visual art in the history classroom, examining historical visual art both as a primary source and as a constructed account. Here the authors discuss how the visual arts use symbols, color, composition, and movement to portray images of the past and, in the process, invite us to construct historical consciousness. As providers of "important and diverse accounts of the past that enrich and extend the curriculum," the authors argue, these forms of artistic representations "should be studied and interrogated alongside more traditional accounts from books, articles, or film" (p. 129). Studying the visual arts in this manner, the authors suggest, is important not only for the study of the past but also in how they help shape "personal and collective identity and therefore views of the present and the future. (p. 153).

Chapter Five ventures into pedagogical explorations of public commemorative art—monuments, statues and murals situated in the public space—that, while often controversial, comprise a key part of public memory and are fundamental to understanding what, who and why societies choose to revere and remember and/or forget and the kinds values and perspectives they help transmit about the past and the ways in which we ought to desire, as individuals and as a collective, in the present and for the future. While historical mindedness, the authors contend, should include facility with what and how historians know, it should also incorporate an understanding of the role of public memory in shaping historical consciousness (p. 170), including its often controversial nature (p. 172). Public commemorative art, they suggest, "provides not only a point of convergence for bringing together consideration of different eras, but also two very different approaches to the past: heritage and history" (p. 177).

Chapter Six is pedagogical in nature, addressing the implications of the issues discussed in the previous five chapters for the teaching and learning of history. It calls on teachers to find creative ways to engage students with the arts in the history classroom in order to deepen and complexify students' historical understandings as they compare the manner in which creators of artistic representation and historians depict the past (p. 224). The chapter highlights four specific implications advanced by current research in the area of history education: "developing students'

understandings of how art shapes personal and collective historical narratives and how those operate to construct the social world; enhancing students' abilities to work with a range of historical sources; engaging students with the ethical dimension of the past; and fostering historical perspective taking" (p. 20)

As might be expected, the books concluding chapter, *Chapter Seven*, revisits the main themes of the book, with a particular focus on both summarizing and further developing the myriad ways in which meaningful attention to the arts can help develop more complex understandings of history and, at the same time, foster cross-disciplinary connections, the considerations of under-represented perspectives (including indigenous perspectives), the development of more complex analyses and critical thinking, and, throughout, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between history, historical consciousness and collective memory. This chapter, however, does more by also discussing the humanizing and civic mission of history education, examining how the incorporation of the arts invites us to more fully consider how history education does/can/should permeate the present. Beyond the development of students' traditional historical knowledge and skills, the authors remind us, history education must also contribute to students' development as citizens and human beings. With a particular focus on citizenship, broadly defined, this chapter explores how attention to the arts can contribute to both those important endeavours (p. 248). Understanding the past, including in its artistic representations, the authors argue, "is critical to develop a full sense of who we are as human beings both individually and collectively, who the other people are who share the world with us, and how we might engage together in working toward the common good." History education that includes the arts, they conclude, "is both a humanizing and a civic mission and it has never been more critical than it is today" (p. 244). The recent political and civic debates around the world—a topic the authors discuss in depth—about the removal of statues representing the legacy of racism, colonialism and other forms of oppression further the authors' point. Indeed, such debates are evidence not only about the powerful pedagogical power of the arts as teachers of a troubling past but also of particular forms of public consciousness and the public's increasing awareness of that power and its ramifications for individual and collective identity.

What I find particularly compelling about this book is the manner in which issues are not simply discussed once before moving on to others but are continuously re-visited in the context of other issues. In that, the book offers us both an example of how various aspects of incorporating the arts in the history curriculum impact, and are impacted by, other considerations, as well as that the relationship between history and the arts is multifaceted and intricate. In that regard, I highly and enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone involved in the field of history/social studies education and beyond. It is at once a scholarly and practical guide to how we ought to think about history and the arts as two interrelated aspects of informing us about the past.

What can the arts do for/to history?

As comprehensive, thoughtful and insightful as the book already is, I believe there are a few areas to which it might have paid more attention. One such area would be an acknowledgement of the broader intellectual discourses—e.g., postmodernism, poststructuralism,

postcolonialism, feminism, race-based theories, to name a few—that, in many ways, undergirded the kind of thinking that underlies many of the contemporary discussions included in the book, especially about the creative nature of history and the need for the field to be more inclusive in the scope of perspectives it affords. Without an engagement with these intellectual movements, it might appear that history simply work up one morning and spontaneously came to realize the importance of these issue on its own.

The second area is the limited use the authors make of the literature in the broader field of art education and its contributions to what studying the arts makes possible (e.g., Eisner, 2002; Greene 1978, 1991) as well as of the previous literature in the area of history/social studies education and the arts that has already, albeit some of it much earlier, explored some of the issues discussed in this book (e.g., Epstein, 1994a, 1994b; Singer Gabella, 1991, 1996, 1998). Incorporating these three areas into the book in some way, I believe, would have provided more context for the issues already so well addressed in the book and a deeper sense of a variety of engagements with them across time and related domains.

Perhaps a missed opportunity more than a critique is the overall positioning the authors ascribed to the areas of history and the arts as they explored the relationship between them and, more importantly, how the exploration of that relationship might move history education further in more interesting and meaningful directions. Throughout, the book appears to have two missions in mind. One is to explore the need to integrate the arts more purposefully into history education. The other is to elaborate on a number of discussions taking place within the area of history. There is no question that Clark and Sears excel in both missions, particularly with respect to their ability to integrate the two. Still, there is a nagging sense that while the book is about the arts, it is written from the perspective of history, using the criteria of the discipline and its discourses to speak about the arts. In that, and despite advocating what some might call a “radical” idea of including the arts in the study of history, the book will not unsettle most readers’ understanding of history education in fundamental ways. Even though some out-of-the-box ideas are surely included throughout the book, they are considered more as ways to advance the field of history education as we already know it than as challenges to it.

While the book does a wonderful job discussing how to read art thoughtfully, both from an artistic perspective and through the lens of disciplinary history, it focuses less on how to use the ways through which we read artistic forms to read history, not simply as way to get to the past itself but at the very disciplinary constructions of the past into history. In other words, while the authors smartly apply a lens of history to the reading of artistic representations, what the lenses of art might offer history educators are not considered as much.

To truly integrate history education and the arts rather than simply integrate the arts *into* history education requires using the arts to question history. From that standpoint, different questions arise: For example, how does studying the arts help us think differently, or more critically, about the representation of history as a discipline? How might encounters with art help students challenge the more conventional notions of disciplinary history? How can encounters with the arts help students look into narrative forms in “proper” history? How might they invite students to look more closely and deeply at ideology, perspective or intent in historical accounts? If presentism is judged in the context of artistic representations of the past, how might students

use that same sensibility to question the idea that history, too, is always written from a particular present? How might critically looking at Picasso's *Guernica* or the Vimy Ridge Memorial (both discussed extensively in the book) invite students to question not only the limits of visual representations but also at the limits of written language otherwise used in the history classroom? In other words, to what degree, and in what ways, might the integration of the arts and the questions that integration raises be turned around to be equally directed at the discipline of history itself, if we want students to be equally critical of all historical accounts they encounter, both inside the classroom and outside of it?

Posing such questions both *in* and *about* the history classroom, I suggest, not only creates an equilibrium between history and the arts in history education, no longer privileging the criteria of former at the expense of the latter; it also substantiates and expands the purview provided in this wonderful book by finding a more neutral space in between the arts and history that could foster a more comprehensive, nuanced and complex understanding of the broader uses and misuses of the past and how they are used and misused to engender particular understanding of the past as well as about our identity, subjectivity and desires as individuals and as a collective.

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