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The Summoning of the Muses: Transporting a History Class into the Studio

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ABSTRACT

Teaching art history in a Department of Visual Communication (VC) can be challenging for any instructor. VC students tend to be very practically oriented, so engaging them in theoretical subjects requires that the instructor demonstrate the relevance of those subjects to their actual practice. An experimental second-year course titled "Mythological Narratives in Art and Design" introduced a practical approach to theory that made the subjects more appealing to VC students. It utilized the technical knowledge they had acquired in previous studio classes to interpret the theoretical subjects with a view toward creating their own artistic expressions. The course methodology relied on John Dewey's theory of meaningful learning and Jürgen Habermas's tri-dimensional conception of knowledge. In accord with Dewey's usage of prior experience in the process of learning and Habermas's technical, practical, and critical dimensions of knowledge, the students' professional skills, acquired in four semesters of workshops and studio classes, were harnessed to approach the classical narratives and artworks. The students channeled their technical knowledge into practice, basing their final artistic project on their theoretical research and completing it using their professional skills. The current paper argues that this practical approach to the teaching of art history in schools of design is more effective, as it engages students' attention, keeps them creative throughout the learning process, and makes the studies of humanities relevant and meaningful to their practice.

Keywords: epic poems, mythological narratives, technology, practice, theory, visual communication (VC), history education, artwork

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1. Introduction

Lecturers in art history are familiar with the challenge of engaging Visual Communication (VC) students in theoretical subjects. These very practically oriented students, who are invested in such classes as Motion Graphics, Storytelling in Space, and Digital Workshops, tend to believe that theoretical studies are boring, and they often question their relevance to their actual studio work and profession. The involvement of lecturers educated within the humanities in Faculties of Design might be a partial solution to the ongoing crises in the humanities and to the shutting down of Departments of Languages, Art, and Literature in the face of the notion that what has been considered a good classical education for hundreds of years is now unnecessary (Hall, 1990; Fish, 2010). Our task as educators is to show design students that history is worth learning, that mythological and epic poems are powerful and exciting, and that for generations artists were invested in those texts, which helped them to produce their best works of art.

Important studies on the intersection of arts and design education and innovative approaches to teaching humanities to technically oriented students have been published in the last two decades. Hein and Duren (2020) dealt with the way students at TU Delft studied architectural history through experiential learning, textbooks, or different types of pedagogy, and explored how they used what they learn in their own design practice. Hadjiyanni and Zollinger (2010)

wrote about expanding the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of history to stimulate students' interest, learning, engagement, and creativity. Finally, Frolova et al. (2018) focused on the application of IT in the teaching of humanities in technical institutions of higher education and the need to integrate creativity into teaching using effective methods borrowed from the humanities, such as case studies, discussions and colloquia.

More directly relevant to our current purposes, Sim and Blacker (2007) stressed the relevancy of history to the practical studies of design. Teaching at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, they addressed this problem as it relates to first-year students in several design disciplines, whom they provided with a framework of historical understanding within which they will be able to position their future studies. To underscore the convergence of visual design forms and histography to their curriculum, they included a session under the banner of "Design Heroes", which combined theory and practice. In offering this session Blacker and Sim took into account the fact that their first-year students would acquire a deeper understanding of designing as a profession in subsequent courses. Nevertheless, through this session, their students got a fair notion of how history is relevant to their design practice.

With Sim and Blacker's (2007) objectives and solutions in mind, the following paper describes an experimental course in which a graphic designer (acting as a co-instructor) and an art historian co-taught an experimental course for second-year VC students designed to combine theory and practice as an effective way to teach them history. The course was offered in the spring semester of 2023 as part of the curriculum of a new and innovative Department of Visual Communication at Sami Shamoon College of Engineering in Beer Sheva, Israel.

Israeli VC students of the Z generation, who graduated from the Israeli education system, are familiar with mythological narratives as expressed in video gaming, YouTube, Netflix series, and fantasy movies, but they have had little exposure to the ancient tales in their original formats. They are familiar with Bible stories, they know the tale of the Flood told in the Book of Genesis (Chapters 6–9), yet the vast majority of them have no clue about the Sumerian Flood tale in the *Epic Poem of Gilgamesh* (Tablet XI: 8–155; George, 1999a), a precursor to the biblical version (Hasel, 1972; Lambert, 1965).

In fact, our VC students' first encounter with Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, was in the first-year course "Introduction to the History of Design", where they learned about the development of a pictographic language, starting with the Sumerian cuneiform clay tablets of Uruk, dated to 3100 B.C.E., on which the Gilgamesh epic was written (Meggs, 2006). Similarly, they have a vague notion of Virgil's (1981) *Aeneid* and a slightly better idea of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1950), as they follow some of the epics' protagonists in gaming and in other forms of visual media, but without knowing their literary origins. Would it be possible to have them open the books in search of their favorite mythological heroes? Could they relate to the imagery of those heroes painted on Greek amphoras around 600 B.C.E.? Would they recognize them in Baroque Italian paintings and sculptures? And more important, how do these remote subjects connect to their actual practice of VC?

The course covered mythology and epic art from antiquity to the postmodern period. It also introduced a range of classical texts such as the *Enūma Eliš* (the Babylonian creation tale), the *Epic Poem of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. The theory was introduced in an interdisciplinary fashion by linking segments of the classical texts to related works of art. But unlike Blacker and Sim's freshmen students, our sophomores were in the fourth semester of their VC studies. Thus, for the practical part of the course, we were able to take advantage of the technical skills they had acquired in studio classes and workshops, assuming that these would allow them to render written narratives into visual designs. The

assumption was that such a pragmatic approach would underscore the relevance of history to the practical studies of VC and help today's students overcome some of the objective difficulties involved in reading classical texts.

The reading of myths and ancient epics, though essential to the course, involved objective difficulties. On one hand, instructors can count on the dynamic and fascinating qualities of epic poems that still have the capacity to engender a wide range of emotions among their readers, ranging from eros to pathos (Losada, 2017). Yet, on the other hand, we owe the students a fair discussion of female characters, who are often misjudged in ancient texts, which were generally written by male authors whose opinions about women were rooted within the context of a patriarchal society (Cahill, 1995; Haynes, 2020; Lefkowitz, 1985).

Another problem is the actual reading of these ancient texts, some of which are dated as early as 2700 B.C.E. Their outdated writing styles, archaic translations, and strange narrative structures are difficult for contemporary readers to understand and process. This issue alone can discourage the most devoted VC students, whose love for mythology is mostly based on the digital media (Parker, 2001). Luckily, the students tend to have nostalgic memories of Disney's *Hercules* (1997) and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels (2005–2015), in particular the first two books, which were made into movies – *The Lightning Thief* in 2010 and *The Sea of Monsters* in 2013 (Murnaghan, 2011). Although their content is not entirely accurate, this positive childhood experience can be an advantage for students who are determined not to give up on reading difficulties as they expect to experience the same kind of satisfaction.

2. Methodology: Utilizing Experience and Technical Skills in the Teaching of Humanities

Making the study of art history relevant to VC students requires changing the conservative methods that lecturers in humanistic studies have utilized for generations. In the information era, class note-taking, as well as memorizing dates and names are out of the question, as we share our slide presentations with the students, who are more than capable of looking for further information on the Internet. As educators our task is to encourage the students to use their skills and experience to search for new information, to evaluate and analyze it, to form their own opinions and their own creative designs. The methodology of the course relied on two 20th century philosophers who encouraged the use of personal experience and technical skills in the learning process.

The first is John Dewey (1859–1952), whose theory of meaningful learning, posited in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1963), introduces the organic connection between prior experience and learning. Dewey was a pragmatist and as such he considered that all learning is essentially problem-solving. His approach was to provide students with a practical task, a problem that they have to solve using prior experience and acquired skills. This process encourages further inquiry and testing, it expands the students' knowledge and makes the learning meaningful and relevant. In accord with Dewey, in the course problematic issues regarding classical texts and artworks were presented to the students, who were required to solve them using their experience and technical skills, so as to be able to criticize them and to formulate their own interpretations.

The second is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose conception of knowledge, as discussed in his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), has three levels or dimensions – a technical, a practical, and a critical dimension. The course's instructors applied Habermas's epistemological categories to the learning process, training the students to combine these aspects of knowledge dialectically. The students harnessed their technical skills to bring new meaning to the ancient narratives and to articulate them into the platforms of their practice. To do this well, they had to exhibit what Habermas called a critical understanding of the narrative.

Such an understanding, rooted in the very rich notion of critical theory, has to do with dialectically creating something new out of what already exists. In other words, the students' technical skills were called upon to relate the ancient narratives and works of art with a contemporary and critical vision of the meanings embedded within them. They channeled their technical knowledge into practice, basing their artistic project on theory and carrying it out using their technical skills.

What follows introduces the methodology of the course "Mythological Narratives in Art and Design", which interweaves theory and practice in the teaching of art history to VC students. This paper argues that this combination is effective when teaching design students in technical schools, since it helps them relate to the theoretical subjects through the means of their practices. The paper includes an example of class teaching and some examples of the students' design projects. It demonstrates the importance of theoretical learning in schools of design and proves that art history is still relevant to the practice of VC and that classical texts can still inspire young future artists.

3. A Practical Interdisciplinary Approach to the Teaching of Art History

The Latin poet Horace (1836) established the relationship between art and poetry in the first century B.C.E. in his *Ars Poetica*, where, by emphasizing the similar effects that the two arts evoke, he implied that poetry merits the same careful interpretation that was then reserved for painting:

> As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance: one loves the dark; another, which is not afraid of the critic's subtle judgment, chooses to be seen in the light; the one has pleased once, the other will give pleasure if ten times repeated (Horace, 1836, pp. 361–365).

The symbiosis between the two arts was picked up in the 20th century by art historian R. W. Lee, in his canonical essay *Ut Pictura Poesis*, where he agreed with the 16th century Italian painter and theoretician Gian Paolo Lomazzo that poetry and painting are sisters. Born at the same time, they are quasi-identical in terms of their nature, content, and purpose, despite their different means of interpretation (Lee, 1967).

As an instructor in art history, specializing in Italian Baroque, and teaching in a VC department, I find the link between art and poetry inspiring. The fact that mythological texts led great Renaissance and Baroque artists to create some of the world's most appreciated masterpieces is at the heart of my research. In my teaching, I introduce the works of art side by side with their relevant texts, discussing such critical issues as the artist's right to modify existing iconographies, to convey or challenge the text's messages, and whether the emotions elicited in the texts are still relevant to artists in our times. If this worked for generations of artists who drew spectacular iconographies guided by texts, it should also work for contemporary students.

To achieve a creative environment, the art history course was held in the department's studio (VC students' natural working environment, where they move and talk more freely). They were encouraged to use their sketchbooks and iPads to process their ideas and share them with the class.

To emphasis the ongoing dialogue between poetry and painting, the class was presented with a series of twelve fresco paintings based on Virgil's *Aeneid*, which Ludovico, Agostino, and Annibale Carracci created in *La Sala dell'Eneide* (Aeneid's chamber) in Palazzo Fava in Bologna around 1586. The three painters were well-read and based many of their works on classical and contemporary literature. They established a school of painting in their native Bologna, *L'Accademia degli Incamminati*, where they encouraged their students to use books

as guidance for classical iconography. The modern art scholar, C. Robertson (2008) mentioned Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1914), and Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia, one of the Carracci's contemporary biographers, listed the works of Virgil and Cornelius Tacitus from Agostino's library with the artist's annotations (2000).

As children, Agostino and Annibale attended *La Scuola di Grammatica* in Bologna, where Virgil's *Aeneid*, written around 30–19 B.C.E., was part of the Latin curriculum (Dempsey, 1980; Grendler, 1989), which enabled these painters to use Virgil's Latin epic poem as guidance in their practice of art. Their frescoes in the Aeneid chamber include cartouches with Latin quotes and paraphrases from Virgil's text, which Malvasia listed in his description of their work (2000). To reinforce the link between text and image, the artists added painted statues of young children unrolling Virgil's poem in the corners of the chamber, which suggests that they are narrating the episodes described in the nearby paintings.

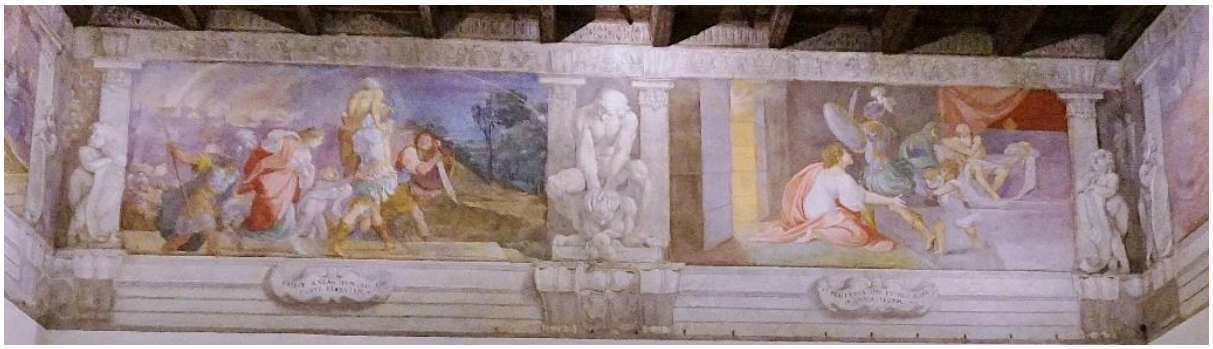

Figure 1. Agostino Ludovico and Annibale Carracci, La Sala dell'Eneide (Detail; (1584-86). Palazzo Fava in Bologna
Source: Wikimedia Commons

During the class session, the students examined the first painting in the series, Carracci's *Trojan Horse Is Brought into the City*, which depicts the monumental wooden horse with armed Greek soldiers hidden inside. Devised by Odysseus, it was a strategic ploy to gain entry into the fortified city of Troy. In the painting one can see the walls that were demolished to bring the horse into the city. To the right on the foreground, a female figure is running toward the horse, identified by some contemporary and modern scholars as the priestess Casandra, intent on warning the Trojans of the ruin that the horse will bring to their city (Cavicchioli, 2004, p. 53, note 26). Yet the celebraters do not seem to believe her. They are clearly in a state of ecstasy playing with cornets and tambourines, while thinking that the gods gave them this horse to protect the city from future invasions.

Figure 2. Ludovico Carracci, The Trojan Horse is Brought into the City (1584-86). Palazzo Fava in Bologna
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The narrative that inspired the Carracci's iconography appears in the *Aeneid* Book II, where the Trojan prince Aeneas and a group of his followers, who had escaped from the city of Troy, find refuge in Dido's kingdom of Cartago. Aeneas tells the queen how the Trojans celebrated as they carried the monumental horse into their city, crashing it into the gates and damaging their defenses, despite the warning prophecy of Casandra. Pedagogically a section of the text along with the painting was introduced, and the students were able to compare text and image:

> "Pull the statue to her house", they shout,
> "and offer prayers to the goddess's divinity".
> We breached the wall, and opened up the defences of the city.
> All prepare themselves for the work and they set up wheels
> allowing movement under its feet, and stretch hemp ropes
> round its neck. That engine of fate mounts our walls
> pregnant with armed men. Around it boys, and virgin girls,
> sing sacred songs, and delight in touching their hands to the ropes:
> Up it glides and rolls threateningly into the midst of the city.
> O my country, O Ilium house of the gods, and you,
> Trojan walls famous in war! Four times it sticks at the threshold
> of the gates, and four times the weapons clash in its belly:
> yet we press on regardless, blind with frenzy,
> and site the accursed creature on top of our sacred citadel.
> Even then Cassandra, who, by the god's decree, is never
> to be believed by Trojans, reveals our future fate with her lips.
> We unfortunate ones, for whom that day is our last,
> clothe the gods' temples, throughout the city, with festive branches.
> Meanwhile the heavens turn, and night rushes from the Ocean,
> wrapping the earth, and sky, and the Myrmidons' tricks,
> in its vast shadow: through the city the Trojans
> fall silent: sleep enfolds their weary limbs (Virgil, *Aeneid,* Book II, Lines 232–253).

A second version of this scene, which also follows Virgil's text, is Nicolo dell'Abate's (1512–1571) *Trojan Horse Enters the Walls of Troy*. This work was part of a series for the *gabinetto*

of the castle at Scandiano, near Modena, painted around 1546 (Langmuir, 1936), with which, according to Malvasia, the Carracci were familiar (2000). Yet despite the reference to the same passage, dell'Abate seemed to be more concerned with the engineering problems involved in moving the monumental horse into the fortified city. He depicted the Trojans pulling the ropes to roll the horse forward, showing a soldier on the left lower corner directing the effort. Unlike the Carracci's demolished walls, dell'Abate's painting shows a small break in the upper arch of the narrow gate made by Trojan workers to accommodate the horse's head.

Figure 3. Nicolò dell'Abate, The Trojan Horse Enters the Walls of Troy (c.1546). Fresco, at the castle of Scandiano.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The students noticed that both images were based on the same text, yet the painters highlighted different issues. The Carracci's horse is about to enter the city through the demolished wall, following Virgil's line 334: "We [the Trojans] breached the wall and opened up the defences of the city". Whether dell'Abate's rendition follows lines 342 to 344: "Four times it [the horse] sticks at the threshold of the gates […] yet we press on regardless, blind with frenzy". These differences raised critical questions about the artists' freedom to manipulate the narratives.

D. M. Unger deals with the artist's freedom of interpretation in his book, *Titian's Allegory of Marriage,* by introducing the 16th-century concept of poetic license and explaining it as the artist's choice to provide his own interpretation on any subject, thus creating new connections, new definitions, new borders, and new interactions (2022, pp. 15–17). Unger cites the theologian Giovanni Andrea Gilio, whose idea of poetic license appears in his *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters*, where he describes three types of artists – the historian, the poetic, and a blend of the two, assuming that the poetic painter implements his right to free interpretation:

> Because it should be understood that the painter is sometimes a pure historian (*puro istorico*), sometimes a pure poet (*puro poeta*), and sometimes a mixture of the two (*a le volte è misto*). When he is a pure poet I think that it is legitimate for him to paint everything that his own imagination (*capriccio*) dictates (Gilio, 2018, p. 101).

The artist's freedom of interpretation is even more relevant nowadays. The Israeli illustrator (and my colleague) E. Eloa shared with the students his own experience in designing *The*

Trojan Horse for the front page of *Six Great Cunning Stories*, a children's illustrated book published in 2015.

Figure 4. Eitan Aloa, The Trojan Horse (Digital Illustration), 2015, Copyrights: Eitan Aloa

He related the classical concept of poetic license to modern design practice and pointed to the designer's own internal debate when modifying a classical iconography that was used repeatedly by generations of artists. Eloa decided to focus on the logistic problems that Odysseus had to overcome as he commanded the Greek soldiers to equip the horse with weapons and supplies. He depicted soldiers climbing a ladder with lances, which seemed larger than the opening in the horse's belly, a barrel of wine spilled at the base of the ladder, a falling helmet, a destroyed stone column on the ground, and a real horse panicking, with Odysseus standing atop of the wooden horse directing the operation. Eloa's innovative interpretation demonstrates the potential of classical tales for engendering exciting new images, which cannot be achieved unless the artist exercises his/her right to freedom of interpretation when approaching a classical text.

The inherent meaning of the Trojan horse, a metaphor for a marvelous gift that bears destruction within it, engaged the students' consciousness as they encountered a moving installation of a three-dimensional horse that strolled among the protesters against the anti-democratic legislation that the right-wing religious government of Israel started promoting on January 4, 2023. VC students, no matter their political affiliation, were fascinated by the signs, performances, and installations that the protest produced. The horse moving among the protesters in the city of Beer-Sheva attracted their attention. Its saddle reads *Stop the Crazy Galloping*, which was intended to criticize the speed with which these laws were passed in the Knesset.

Figure 5. Stop the Crazy Galloping, 2023, Beer-Sheva. Copyrights: Tal Rogovski

Despite not being a wooden horse, the symbolism of the Trojan horse was hard to miss, as this horse seems to bear the message of our society's destruction, making Virgil's message more relevant than ever.

The example of the Trojan horse discussed above reflects the interdisciplinary approach to art and literature implemented in the entire course "Mythological Narratives in Art and Design". The students applied the same method in their final papers. At the end of the semester, each gave a 15-minute presentation about a particular narrative they had selected and the associated works of art that they intend to research. They were expected to add a discussion of their design projects that would reflect their own interpretations of the narratives. At this point, most of the students had a good idea as to how their design projects would fit into their written research: whether their artwork would be an innovation or a version of the existing iconographies, whether it would challenge the message implied in the text or convey the message onto one of the newest VC platforms, where it had never been seen before.

4. Student Assessment Methods

"Mythological Narratives" was defined as a semestrial proseminar, held in two small groups of 20 students each for two hours weekly. The students were evaluated by three parameters: attendance and participation (10%), oral presentation (20%), and a final paper and design project (70%). Class attendance and participation were highly encouraged. The idea behind this request was to have the student practice in class on how to work with written narratives and their respective works of art. Once they grasped the method, frontal teaching turned into a vivid conversation, including debates and arguments regarding the artists' interpretations of the classics.

By the middle of the semester, the students had a good notion of the subject of their final paper. By this point, they were meeting regularly with the co-instructor to discuss their design projects. Their 15-minute presentations in class were scheduled for the last quarter of the semester. By then, they could define the topic of their research and the works of art studied in their research, and have a good idea of how their design project fit in. Following the presentations, the students scheduled meetings with the course instructor to review the required references.

The final submission included both the students' research paper and their design project. The research papers included works of art, which were related to their topic, the classical texts, as well as articles and books that supported their analysis on the subject. It included a self-assessment of their own design project and a discussion of how it fit into the catalogue of works discussed in their papers, emphasizing whether their design project contributed to or challenged established conceptions and interpretations. The papers were limited to 12 pages, including

text, references, figures and bibliography. The design projects analyzed were submitted separately, so the different VC platforms and media selected by the students could be appreciated.

5. Practical Knowledge: Following the Design Brief

Having established the course's working methodology, we put the practical part into motion, as the graphic designer, the co-instructor, presented the students with a design brief to frame the concepts of their projects. The students were told to create a teaser, to draw people's interest and to provide a small amount of information regarding an imaginary exhibition that will be inspired by the epic hero, heroine, episode, quest, or love story that they intend to research for their final papers. The brief sent the students into a creative process, wherein they started by elaborating a concept based on the literature and the work of art they chose for their research. They could set their imaginary exhibition in the past, present, or future. It could be in an actual place, such as in the street or a museum, or on a digital platform such as YouTube or Instagram. They were allowed to use the technique of their choice, as long as it suited the concept of their work: a poster, a series of posters, a book, a game, a video, a story, an interactive invitation, or an installation.

Pedagogically the program was divided into three parts: First, each student or pair of students met with the co-instructor privately for initial approval of their ideas and further guidance. To the second meeting the students arrived with written answers to the subjects raised in the brief. At that point, they had a notion of their exhibition concept, the kind of message that it would project, the feelings that it might engender, the potential audience, the artist(s), and the kinds of artworks to be presented, as well as the time and place of the exhibition. For the third meeting the students were asked to use a mood board to perfect their ideas and help them to create their own visual language for the teaser. They were encouraged to use typography to include such useful information as the exhibition's name, some exciting details about the subject, the opening day, and so on.

For example, the concept of Shani Avraham's design project follows Homer's *Odyssey* and focuses on Circe, the beautiful enchantress, who turned Odysseus's crew into pigs when they landed on her island:

> Circe ushered the rest [of Odysseus men] into her hall, gave them settles and chairs to sit on, and then prepared them a mixture of cheese, barley-meal, and yellow honey flavoured with Pramnian wine. But into this dish she introduced a powerful drug to make them lose all memory of their native land. And when they had emptied the bowls in which she had served them, she struck them with her wand, drove them off, and penned them in the pigsties. For now to all appearances, they were swine: they had pigs' heads and bristles, and they grunted like pigs; but their minds were as human as they had been before the change (Homer, 1950, Book X, Lines 232–241).

Inspired by Circe's bowls and wand as mentioned in the literature, Shani went looking for references in the art of ancient Greece. The attic red-figure amphora titled *Circe Transforms One of Odysseus' Men into a Boar*, dated to around 460 B.C.E., shows the sorceress using her wand to mix the contents of a bowl, from which she is feeding a man whose head had just turned into a pig's head (Figure 6). Shani decided to focus on the tools that Circe used to bring about this metamorphosis.

Figure 6. Circe Transforms One of Odysseus's Men into a Boar. Attic Red Figure, ca 460 B.C. E. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

With this concept in mind, Shani used her prior experience to engage in the process of learning. She recruited what Habermas (1971) called technical knowledge, acquired in her professional courses and put them into practice. Using illustrator and vector graphics, basic software that she learned as a freshman in Digital workshop 1, she created the figure of Circe as a black silhouette and achieved complete control of her figure's outline.

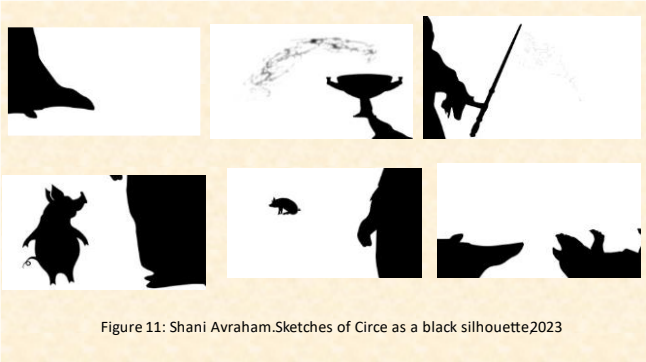

Figure 7. Shani Avraham, Sketches of Circe as a Black Silhouette, 2023

While mood-boarding, Shani started developing the visual graphic language of her project. She borrowed the green aura of Disney's witch *Malificent* (2014), which appears every time she casts a spell. The aura helped bring Circe's plain black image to life, giving her some volume and highlighting her magical powers. She created separate frames of this episode, put them together using After Effects, and wound up with a 40-seconds graphic motion video, which she titled *Circe 360^0*. Her short video communicated the message of metamorphosis from the ancient text. It showed Circe turning men into pigs by manipulating their appetites using food and kitchen tools.

Figure 8. Shani Avraham. Circe 360, Video Art, 2023
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbak4RX0qgg

Searching for the right typography for the headlines, Shani opted for the banners of the series *American Gods* as references. To recreate the sense of terror elicited by Circe's sorcery, she made the words of her headlines push into one another shrinking, shaking, and finally disintegrating into the black background. She chose creepy music that helped to enhance the viewers' sense of terror.

Shani's work is an excellent example of what Dewey understands as a problem- solving solution. The design brief launches her into a practical task that she solves using her experience and technical skills. These help her evaluate Homer's story and Circe's tools depicted in the amphora, and to formulate her own interpretation of witchcraft in action.

6. Technical Knowledge: Putting VC Technical Skills into Use

Following Habermas's (1971) concept of knowledge as a tri-level process, the students were encouraged to utilize their preexisting technical VC knowledge when they approached the practical part of the course. The students were able to rely on the four semesters of workshops and studio classes, where they made use of some of the technologies that are basic to the practice of VC, covered in a range of courses, including Illustration, Digital Workshops 1–3, Graphic Design, Motion Graphics, Documentary Filmmaking, Introduction to 3D, and Storytelling on Space. The instructors' objective was to make use of these technical skills to have the students visualize the classical narratives in a new and innovative way by approaching them with the professional tools of VC practice.

For example, Einat Drezner and Katrina Doroshenko wrote their paper on images of Theseus's early life as recounted in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. The story tells of Theseus's noble origin, which he discovered in his youth in the small Kingdom of Troezen when he lifted a heavy rock to find the sandals and the sword that his biological father, King Aegeus of Athens, had left for him before he was born (Plutarch, 1914 Vol, I, Paragraph III, Lines 4–5).

In their paper, Einat and Katrina examine contemporary illustrations of this scene in animated movies and children's books. For their design project they opted for the technique of packaging, which they mastered in "Storytelling in Space", a studio class that provided them with the steps and rules needed to transfer a 2D story into 3D. Using the packaging technique, they were able to install their exhibition in a 3D box that functions as a teaser when closed, while inside it contains the pieces of a game that could be thought of as a small exhibit featuring Theseus's adventures.

The box's surface shows a ring composed of spiral square shapes that resembles King Minos's maze, where Theseus fought and defeated the Minotaur. The name of the game "Theseus' Journey" (written in Hebrew) appears at its center and images of Theseus, his ship, and the Minotaur are depicted on the ring.

Figure 9. Einat Dresner and Katrina Doroshenko, Box Game named "Theseus's Journey", 2023

Einat and Katrina's game is made for players 7 to 100 years old and is designed to be both entertaining and educational. It includes a map of three districts for following the three stages of the game that mark Theseus's journey – over land, on the sea, and inside the maze.

The journey over land is the most interesting one, since it evokes the tale of the sword and the rock, cited above, which is less well-known than Theseus's later exploits. It is designed to play "Jungle Speed" style and includes a totem, a deck of cards with illustrations of rocks and sandals, and instructional cards with quotes and fragments from the Theseus tale.

Figure 10. Einat Dresner and Katrina Doroshenko. Box Game: "The Hero of the Underworld": Map, Cards, and Totem, 2023

The use of both new and preexisting technical skills is evident in the work of May Dahbash and Meytav David, whose project depicts the story of Gilgamesh's refusal of goddess Ishtar's proposal of marriage (Tablet VI: 1–79, George, 1999a). Ishtar offered Gilgamesh prosperity and eternity, yet he seemed to know the true nature of her love: "What bridegroom of yours did endure forever? What brave warrior of yours went up [to the heavens?]" (Tablet VI, Lines 41–42). Gilgamesh's questions are followed with vivid examples of how Ishtar harmed, abused, and damaged her ex-lovers, living creatures of all kinds: the shepherd Dumuzi, whom she sentenced to the Underworld, the *allallu*-bird whose wings she broke; the brave horse that she tied down; another shepherd that she turned into a wolf and had chased by his own shepherd boys and dogs; and her father's gardener, Ishullanu, whom she turned into a dwarf (George, 1999a, Abusch, 1986).

May and Meytav decided to share the Ishtar story on Instagram, which they designed as a teaser for her exhibition. They used AI software, which they mastered on their own, Premier software for video editing, which they learned in the course "Documentary Filmmaking", After Effects to tell a story through movement, which they studied in the course "Motion Graphics", and Photoshop to create image and photo design, practiced in "Digital Workshops 1–3".

In her Instagram story, the goddesses of love and war both lures and threatens her followers to come to her exhibition. Her voice takes us into the corridors of her temple, where oriental music can be heard, and her love letters can be seen discarded among statues of strange, petrified creatures. This setting gives one the impression that those creatures are Ishtar's former lovers, whom she had captured and transfigured. May and Meytav's interpretation seems to suggest that Ishtar's harmful practice of love was perfected into an art and exhibited in her temple.

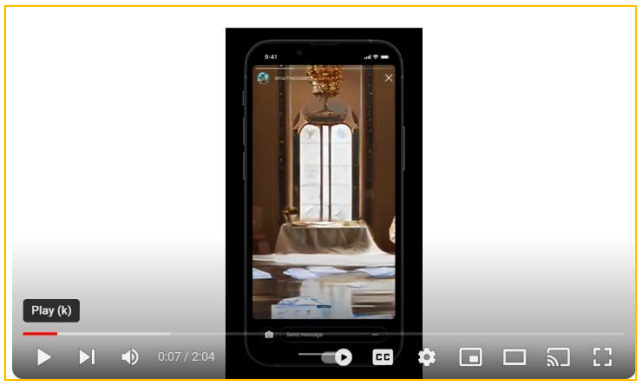

Figure 11. May Dahbash and Meytav David, Ishtar Instagram Story (2023)
Source: https://did.li/ishtar

May and Meytav treated Ishtar's image in their paper. They examined a Babylonian relief and an imperial seal where she is depicted as a powerful voluptuous woman with wings and many spears, surrounded by lions and other royal symbols. Yet in their design project, they chose not to give their Ishtar a woman's shape but mark her powerful presence with her tempting yet terrifying voice, which teases one to enter into what seems to be her twisted concept of an art gallery.

Ishtar's story and Theseus's game highlight the way these students utilized their technical knowledge to anchor the narratives. Their innovative art projects demonstrate that the classical texts are still relevant and have an inherent potential for interpretation in novel and creative ways. The students' technical knowledge enabled the creation of these projects, demonstrating that previous knowledge is an organic part of the pragmatic learning process, in line with Dewey's (1963) idea of "prior experience".

7. Critical Knowledge: Questioning, Analyzing, and Evaluating Art and Literature

Technical, practical, and critical knowledge rest on each other, and the corpus of knowledge acquired by the students in "Mythological Narratives" depends on the interactions among them. No matter what induced what, the students ended up picking up the books and reading epic poems written thousands of years ago, some of them to find an accurate description of the epic hero/ heroine of their choice, others to compare existing works of art to the written narratives, and still others to get a better understanding of the poem: to focus on the emotions elicited by the poem or to discover new interpretations hidden between its lines. Critical thinking about the text allowed the students to form their own opinions, which they elaborated on in their final papers and interpreted in their design projects.

A critical understanding of emotions in the reading of *Gilgamesh* epic is evident in Galit Beilin's poster museum, Gilgamesh's Life *Story: A Journey to Divinity*, which she composed as a diptych featuring Gilgamesh's two faces.

Figure 12. Galit Beilin, Gilgamesh's Life Story: A Journey to Divinity (2023)

The poster is based on her understanding of the change in Gilgamesh's character. Her research relied on George's article "What's New in the Gilgamesh Epic?" where the Assyriologist contends that Gilgamesh's life can be seen as two quests, the first for a material purpose and the second for a spiritual one (George, 1999b, p. 51).

In the first, the arrogant young king tries to achieve eternal glory and ends up infuriating the gods, whereas in the second he is a desperate man attempting to achieve immortality. In the first quest, Gilgamesh is accompanied by Enkidu, whom the gods created as his equal. With Enkidu's help, Gilgamesh defeated the monster Humbaba (God Anu's guardian of the cedar forest) and chopped down the sacred trees (Tablet V:179–301; George, 1999a). Together, they also slaughtered the Bull of Heaven, launched from the skies to the land of Uruk, at the request of the goddess Ishtar, in revenge for Gilgamesh's refusal of her marriage proposal (Tablet VI:80–154; George, 1999a).

The second quest was triggered by the death of Enkidu, whom the gods decided to punish for Gilgamesh's arrogance (Tablet VII:1–36; George, 1999a). The king then left his protected city to embark on a dangerous and futile journey to the end of the world in search of eternal life. Although he returned to Uruk empty-handed, this journey apparently changed him, as he was more mature and humbler and had a better understanding of what is important in a man's life.

The epic poem of Gilgamesh, which influenced Homer's writings, was well known until 200 C.E. At some point, the tablets were lost in an earthquake and were only rediscovered in excavations in the Assyrian city of Nineveh at the end of the 19th century. The twelve clay tablets, written in Accadian cuneiform, were found in what was the palace's library, and fill the gaps in the story as recorded in the antique Sumerian fragments of the poem found in archaeological sites around the Middle East including in Israel (George, 1999b, pp. 55–56). Consequently, this poem is only represented in reliefs and seals of antiquity and in contemporary art, leaving a lacuna of seventeen centuries without visual representations.

In her paper, Galit argues that Gilgamesh's change of character described in the poem is not reflected in antique Mesopotamian reliefs and signatures, which show him on his glorious days: capturing a lion and defeating the Bull of Heaven. Neither is the change in his persona apparent in modern images, which tend to focus either on his accomplished or desperate image, representing, respectively, his quest for glory and his futile quest for eternity.

The change in Gilgamesh is the subject of Galit's diptych poster, which she shaped by interpreting the emotions expressed in the poem. Galit learned to visualize feelings in the course "Introduction to Graphic Design", and she used this skill to communicate what she understood to be the text's most important message. Gilgamesh's face on the right side of her

diptych shows a young and arrogant king with sharp eyes and a smug expression, exhibiting his precious crown and clearly expressing satisfaction and accomplishment (see Figure 12). His features are characterized by sharp angles and distinguished from the background by a dark dividing line. His face is shaded by daylight colors of bright yellow and orange, hinting that this image characterizes him at the beginning of his reign, when he repeatedly offended the gods in his search for glory and fame.

The left side of her diptych shows Gilgamesh near the end of his reign, his face shaded by the dark bluish colors of the night, his eyes closed, and his crown hidden by a lock of hair. Galit softened Gilgamesh's features, blending them with the background, thus creating a serene expression on his face, which reflects the suffering that he had endured, as well as the wisdom that he had acquired on his journey. The contrast in her dual-face poster seems to suggest that viewers should find out more about Gilgamesh's life story, which made it a good teaser for her imaginary exhibit on Gilgamesh's life.

Despite the innovative angle of Galit's interpretation, her work is well rooted in artistic representations that she analyzed in her final paper. In particular, she refers to Hassan Nozadian's twelve black-and-white illustrations of the Gilgamesh epic, which appear to follow the twelve tablets of the poem, projecting its rhyme and spirit, and utilizing antique Assyrian symbols. Born and raised in Iran, Nozadian, who lives and works in France, values this poem for its humanistic nature and considers it as his cultural heritage. From the age of twelve he has been fascinated with Gilgamesh's story. He rendered his illustrations in 2014, influenced by his childhood visits to Persepolis, the antient Persian capital of the Achaemenian dynasty, which is located near Shiraz his place of birth. In Persepolis he was first exposed to the ancient reliefs, which date back to 515 B.C.E. His twelve illustrations convey the city's magic and honor its architectural style.

Impressed with Nozadian's visual symbolic language, Galit borrowed the rayed disc to represent the antique image of the Sumerian sun god Shamash (Ornan, 2005) and placed it on the right side of her poster (Figure 12). This symbol appears in Nozadian's *Two Heroes Are Fighting with the Giant of the Cedar Forest*, where the sun god is depicted in the upper right corner, from where he is seen sending a powerful ray to help Gilgamesh and Enkidu overcome the giant Humbaba.

Figure 13. Hassan Nozadian, Two Heroes are Fighting with the Giant of Cedar Forest (Digital illustration), 2014, Copyrights: Hassan Nozadian

She also borrowed the symbol of the ziggurat, the stepped pyramid, built in the city of Ur around 2100 B.C.E. (Kapogianni, 2020). Nozadian depicted this structure in his illustration *Gilgamesh Is Mourning the Death of Enkidu* to represent Enkidu's grave (Figure 14). Galit

placed this structure on the right side of her poster to symbolize the massive building that is associated with Gilgamesh's regime (Figure 12).

Figure 14. Hassan Nozadian, Gilgamesh is Mourning for the Death of Enkidu (Digital illustration), 2014, Copyrights: Hassan Nozadian

The same applies to the lighted pine tree that Galit placed on the left side of her diptych, behind the moon (the symbol of the Akkadian god Sin). According to T. Jacobse, the lighted pine tree symbolizes life, wisdom, and protection (1999, 240–241). In Galit's poster it stood for the wisdom that Gilgamesh gained on his futile journey in search of eternal life (Figure 12). She took that symbol from Nozadian's *Gilgamesh Is Asking Siduri to Show Him the Way*, where it appears behind Siduri, the wise tavern keeper, whom Gilgamesh asked for directions as he approached her tavern at the end of the world.

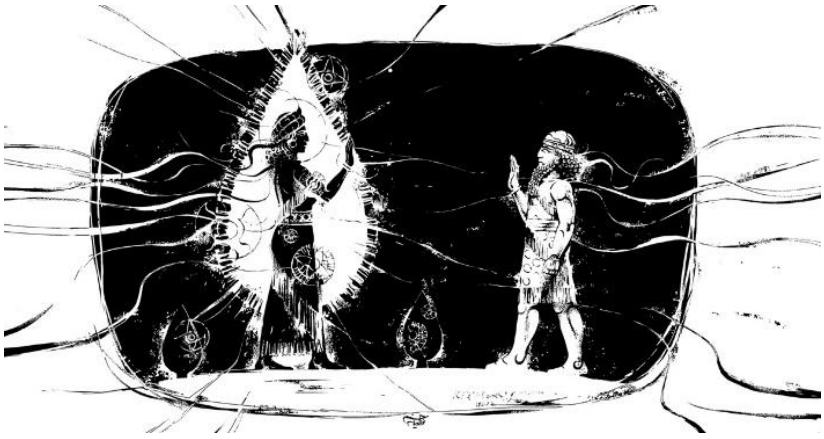

Figure 15. Hassan Nozadian, Gilgamesh is Asking Siduri to Show Him the Way (Digital illustration), 2014, Copyrights: Hassan Nozadian

The lighted pine tree represents her wisdom and guidance, as she explained that eternal life is only given to the gods and advised him to go back home and find happiness in the simplicity of family life.

Galit's quotes of Nozadian's illustrations empower her work by giving it a test of the art style associated with Gilgamesh's epoch. The antique symbols help illuminate the authenticity of Gilgamesh's glorious and gloomy days, and in that sense, they help communicate the sentiments expressed in the poem.

Another critical interpretation of classical texts was Omri Balas's and Daniel Hagag's reading of the demigod Triton, who, owing to his merman shape and his role as a transporter over the seas, they understood as a potential hydraulic force.

As they started their research, Omri and Daniel learned that Triton is mentioned in many classical tales, but he is never the main protagonist. To find out about his origin, shape, attributes, and functions, they had to turn to a range of classical sources. Hesiod's (1914) *Theogony*, estimated to the 8th–7th century B.C.E., describes him as the son of Poseidon and the Nereid Amphitrite, ruling the depths of the sea (Lines 930–932.). Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written about 8th C.E., describes him as his father's messenger, having a man's torso and a fish's tail and calming the waves with his conch-shell trumpet (Book I, Line 333; Book II, Line 8; Book XIII, Line 919). Claudian's 4th century wedding poem the *Epithalamium for Honorius and Maria* describes Triton carrying Venus across the sea because Cupid asked him to take his mother safely to the emperor's wedding (1817, Lines. 215–270). In exchange Cupid offered to shoot the beautiful Nereid Cymothoë with one of his love arrows to make her fall in love with Triton, whom she had rejected (1817, Lines 215–228).

A fresco on the ceiling of the Farnese Gallery by Agostino Carracci portrays the sea voyage described in Claudian's poem. Triton is shown in the center transporting Venus, who is dry and ready to attend the emperor's wedding.

Figure 16. Agostino Carracci, Galatea, Galleria Farnese (1597–1601). Farnese Palace, Rome
Source: Wikimedia Commons

In accord with the poem, Agostino added the three Nereids: Galatea, Psamathe (Dodo), and Cymothoë, who accompany the goddesses to the wedding (1817, Lines, 260–265). Galatea (the second figure on the left), is pointing at Cymothoë, who seems to be hiding behind the goddess to avoid Triton, whom she despises. Cupid is flying above the sea-going delegation, bending his bow to send his arrow at Cymothoë, in fulfillment of his promise to Triton (Kravitz-Lurie, 2023, pp. 24–25).

Triton appears in a similar capacity in Accius's Latin drama *Medea* (or *Argonautae*), written sometime between 140 and 100 B.C.E, of which only fragments remain. He is described by a shepherd, who had never seen a ship, as the force that is moving the "rocky mass" (the Argo) with his trident from the depths of the sea to its surface (Slaney 2019, pp. 51–52). This episode is quoted in Cicero's *Nature of the Gods* (Book XXXV, pp. 121–122):

> So great a mass glides echoing from the deep with loud roar and blast. It rolls the waves before it, and raises eddies by its force, throws itself headlong, and scatters and blows back the sea. And so you might think, now that a deep-edged thunder-cloud was rolling on, now that some rock had been uprooted and was being driven on high by winds or tempests, or that round water-spouts were rising, beaten by the warring billows, unless it be that the sea is preparing ruin for the land, or that Triton, perchance, upheaving with

> his trident the caves beneath their foundations, far down in the surging waters, is casting up from the depths a rocky mass to the light of heaven.

As he was able to move equipment and deities over the water, Omri and Daniel interpreted Triton as a powerful hydraulic technology, whose advantages were manifested by the power inherent in his hybrid form. In their teaser, they used Triton's name and trident to broadcast a new technology that did not advertise a particular product but had an elusive yet curious effect on viewers, which made them want to attend the tech exhibit to find out more.

Impressed with Triton's trident, Omri and Daniel decided to reshape the tool that disrupts the serenity of the sea (Mylonopoulos, 2009, pp. 188–189) and made the original three sharp spikes into smooth and rounded forms that move easily in the water. On their storyboard they programed the frames of their animated movie, where the three rounded balls move in the water and end up forming a rounded trident logo, which becomes part of the letter "o" in Triton's name.

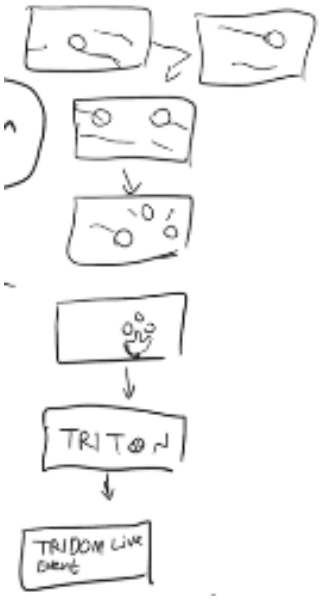

Figure 17. Omri Balas and Daniel Hagag, Story Board for a Commercial (2023)

Using Blender software, they molded their images into 3D shapes. After Effects assisted them in turning the images into a television commercial designed for a tech exhibit, to which they added sea sounds, music, and narration.

Figure 18. Omri Balas and Daniel Hagag, Triton Launch-Teaser Commercial (2023)
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drjT79vaquM

The two projects described in this section – Galit's "Gilgamesh's Life Story" and Omri and Daniel's industrial commercial – are examples of original interpretations based on these students understanding of the works of art and literature used in their research. Galit's poster is based on a critical perception of the poem's emotions, whereas Omri and Daniel's commercial reflects an original interpretation of how a Triton operates, which is based in a critical understanding of the demigod's depictions in a variety of classical texts.

Their final papers and design projects successfully link the three dimensions of knowledge: technical knowledge acquired as VC skills, which helped them approach the stories of Triton and Gilgamesh with their prior professional experience; the practical knowledge required for their design projects, which was made possible by the usage of their technical skills and is reflected in their program and execution of the projects; and the critical knowledge which allowed them to form their own opinions, to use judgment, and to express their points of view: Galit regarding the emotional changes in Gilgamesh persona and Daniel and Omri regarding the functioning of Triton as marine force. The two examples demonstrate how well the three dimensions worked together to create a broad scope of knowledge, implemented in the students' final papers and projects.

8. Limitations and Practical Recommendations

Teaching art history by combining practice and theory involves some challenges. The first is the increased cost of the course, since it requires hiring two instructors to teach a single class. The second challenge is to significantly reduce the number of students attending the course. The third is to find the proper class setting for such a course. Finally, the fourth is to find the proper co-instructor.

Schools of art and design tend to invest their resources in specialized environments such as digital labs, photography and printmaking studios, where students can practice in small groups, while learning to use valuable equipment. When it comes to theoretical studies, these institutions' policy is to save money and space. Therefore, theoretical courses, in particular introductory courses, are held in crowded auditoriums.

Educators willing to implement a practical-technical approach to theory must plan their courses as advanced courses to be able to teach smaller groups of students. The advanced course needs to be based on topics learned in the introductory courses, so the students have a notion of the subject of learning. Design students work better in the studio, where they can absorb theoretical subjects by sketching, writing up ideas, and planning. We want our students to grasp the theoretical material by means of their practice: if sketching the mythological heroes is what connects them to the stories, we must respect and encourage it. Therefore, we must be flexible and squeeze our two-hour theoretical lecture in-between the practical courses, at least until schools of design understand the value of teaching theoretical subjects in the studio.

The co-instructor and the course instructor need to be coordinated on the methodology. Therefore, educators teaching theoretical subjects in design schools should start visiting the studio classes and workshops. This will give them a better understanding of what their students do in their practice, how they learn, speak and move, while practicing new methods and working with new material. Visiting the studio will also give educators in the field of the humanities a better understanding of their professional colleagues' approach to teaching. If the budget is tight, but human relations among colleagues are good, you may feel comfortable to have your students look for specialist advice among the teachers of the staff, especially when each student chooses a particular method of the VC practice for their project. Another option will be to use our research funds to hire a VC graduate student as class assistant, having them

act as co-instructor for the course. In any case, the low budget invested in humanities courses should not discourage any educator willing to apply this pedagogical approach.

9. Conclusions

This study introduced an innovative methodology for teaching art history and classical literature to VC students, a methodology that blends theory and practice. The theoretical teaching dealt with written narratives and the relevant artworks, a combination that has inspired generations of artists to convey classical narratives into visual images. The course "Mythological Narratives" gave the students the opportunity to add their own interpretations to others created over the centuries. The practical teaching was based on the second-year students' technical skills acquired in the first two years of their VC studies. By the course's end, its objectives had been achieved: the students used their VC skills in their study of art history to approach the artworks, epics, and myths as professional designers, basing new theoretical knowledge on their prior experience and making the learning more meaningful and relevant to their practice. The combination of theory and practice achieved in this course blurred the boundaries between the classroom and the studio and kept the students attentive and creative throughout the learning process. Finally, but not less important, this paper demonstrates that art history is relevant to the practice of VC. Having the students use myths and epics in their final work proved that classical texts still have the potential to influence the creation of new images, to be conveyed on exciting new platforms, and to inspire a young generation of future designers.

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