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Style Models the Meaning of Life

SU Classes Wear Types

By Val Van Meter
The Winchester Star

What do a fine art painting and a punk rocker outfit have in common?

Both are forms that communicate ideas, beliefs, and culture.

Students in an art appreciation class at Shenandoah University recently discussed this concept with Robert Bersson, professor emeritus at James Madison University and the author of the class textbook, "Responding to Art: Form, Content, and Context."

Bersson said his textbook, written in 1991 and revised last year, grew out of his 20 years of teaching art and art appreciation.



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In his discussion, as in the textbook, Bersson asked the students to look at things they know, in this case fashions, and consider the form fashions take and what messages they express.

To promote the class discussion, Professor Geraldine Kiefer asked members of her two sections of art appreciation to come to the guest lecture in a variety of dress styles, both old and new.

The 11 a.m. section responded with a business casual style, athletic clothing, dance rehearsal garb, SU's standard vocal presentation formal dress, preppie style, and a punk rock ensemble.

Kiefer noted that, one of the university's pluses is the creativity of its theatrical students.

Bersson asked the class to evaluate the various costumes based on line, shape, texture and the brightness and shades of color used.

The business casual outfit, dark pants, and a blue shirt, with its straight lines, subdued colors, and glossy textures, spoke of symmetry and harmony to the class. The message of the outfit was conservative, professional, mature, and intelligent.

Dana Hurley's pink, off-the-shoulder blouse, with a black mini-skirt dashed with bright blue and pink and orange, atop pink fishnet stockings and black boots,



Robert Bersson (left), author of "Responding to Art: Form, Content, and Context," addressed some of the topics in his textbook recently at a class at Shenandoah University. Freshman Dana Hurley dressed in what she described as "fashionable punk." (Photo by Ginger Perry)

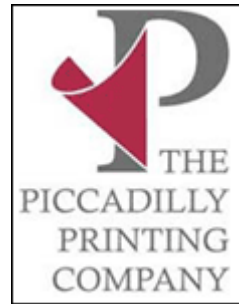
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sent a different message to the class.

The bright, bold colors, the different textures of her apparel, the mix of loose and tight garments and the switch from straight lines to curves, all created tension in her outfit, they said.

One student pointed out that the “quick changes,” in the outfit, from one thing to another, made it feel, “fast paced,” and exciting.



Robert Bersion (left) addresses fashion statements regarding art at a recent art appreciation class at Shenandoah University.
(Photo by Ginger Perry)

The outfit was also labeled “angry” and “aggressive,” and an attention getter.

Some members of the class felt the “punk” style

contributed to the effect of anger, because of a certain era.

But Bersion noted that, psychologically, styles in clothing can be angry and aggressive without any prior context.

“This goes to content,” Bersion said. “Individuals who want attention.”

Punk style, he said, originated in England among disadvantaged youth, and was taken up by middle class young people in America as a way to express independence and individuality.

Hurley, a freshman majoring in costume design, noted that punk has now become a fashion industry line, sold in stores which specialize in the look, with not much “content” behind it.

Senior dance performance major Matthew Dunlap, explained that his dance rehearsal costume reflects his performance “community” standard.

His straight-line, but loose, black and grey outfit was



much less “formal” than what would be required of someone taking ballet, he said.

Out of “respect” for ballet, its dancers wear a tight-fitted costume to rehearse. In modern dance, you can “wear more what identifies you as an individual,” he said, “as long as you can move in it.”

The singing performance dress, labeled a “trash bag” by Hurley, was long, flowing and unrelieved, unadorned black. It allows the individual to “fit into the organization,” Bersson said, as the business casual look does for corporate organizations.

Theo Turner’s “preppie” look is a modern version, popularized by some rappers, the class insisted, and not as formal as the traditional preppie.

Turner’s textured brown sweater over a red shirt, with the collar and shirt tails emerging, and blue jeans had “a lot of variety,” Bersson agreed.

The pattern on one side of the sweater added asymmetry and the variety of textures pushed the tension level higher for that outfit, the class agreed.

Bersson also asked the students when they felt styles like the punk or business casual came about and why they were adopted.

Styles, Bersson said, grow out of content and context.

“Our differences and our similarities say something about our part of the world,” he noted.

After looking at fashions, and interpreting the message they send, he urged the students to consider the “when, where and why this particular style emerged” from a particular culture.

Form, content and context are around us in everyday things, he noted, from fashions to record album covers.

Questions to be asked of fashion styles can also be asked of painting or sculpture or other art forms.

The students, Bersson said, will see those themes carried over in his text.

Kiefer said she appreciated the fact that Bersson’s text

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incorporated both a history of art and instructions on ways to consider and evaluate it.

And, she said, “it’s entertainingly written.”

Hurley, who won praise from Bersson for “dressing up the way you did,” said she found the discussion stimulating.

The freshman from Philadelphia said coming “in costume” was an “incentive to get involved.”

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