Linking Art History to Today
OSU professors describe how students examined roundabout sculpture

For art history professors such as Jennifer Borland and Louise Siddons, teaching students the real-world implications of what they are doing is an ongoing challenge.

As Siddons put it: “How do the past and the present continually collide in a project? How do we teach our discipline in a more engaging way?”

The pair’s friendship goes back 20 years to their graduate-school days at Stanford. So, naturally, they talk often, and their conversations about a then-new piece of public art in downtown Stillwater led to a collaboration and unique opportunity for their students in the fall of 2016.

Borland and Siddons wanted to share their experience and encourage other art historians to try similar projects at their own institutions, so they wrote an academic article that was published in a new journal, *Art History Pedagogy & Practice*.

In “Yay or Neigh? Frederic Remington’s Bronco Buster, Public Art and Socially Engaged Art History Pedagogy,” the professors wrote about what happened when Siddons’ History of American Art and Borland’s Art History Survey II classes examined various issues related to the city’s placement of an enlarged replica of the 1894-95 sculpture in the center of a roundabout at 10th Avenue and Main Street.

“This was a chance to do something really cool,” Borland said. “It was the opportunity to start exercising the student role in class in a different way.”

Borland and Siddons didn’t know what would happen with this experiment in examining a local art installation that wasn’t created with the intention of academic exploration. The professors empowered their classes to make decisions and find relevant information throughout the semester.

“We had the students reach out to various people, but there wasn’t any one person we could go to and say, ‘This is something we want to use in our project.’” Siddons said. “The city of Stillwater was as helpful as possible, but they can only be so helpful when you can’t answer their questions because you don’t even know where this is headed yourself.”

Jennifer Borland (left) and Louise Siddons collaborated to provide a unique community engagement opportunity for their art history students.
There were plenty of questions to consider. For example, who chose that sculpture? Who funded it? The students learned that Stillwater’s Business Improvement District recommended it to the City Council and subsequently paid for it.

But other questions were harder to answer: What message did the community receive from the sculpture? Did the man on the horse allude to the OSU Cowboys, the Stillwater Pioneers, the land run or something else? There were discussions about the local history of cowboys, as well as those who felt excluded by the imagery. They also questioned why a copy of a well-known work with no connection to the state was chosen instead of commissioning an original piece by a local artist.

“The biggest thing for me was for the students to think about what message this sculpture conveys about Stillwater and to think imaginatively about what the alternatives could have been,” Borland said. “That wasn’t part of the assignment, but we wished by the end that we had done that more.”

The classes wrote a short survey to gather information about the community’s knowledge of and feelings about the sculpture. They chose a game day Saturday to collect responses from community members downtown. To draw attention, increasing participation and dialogue, the students held signs and chanted their own range of opinions from celebratory to skeptical.

That portion of the experiment made the students the most nervous, and some community members had strong reactions to what they saw as a protest rather than an academic exercise. But it was also what students wrote the most about in their evaluations of the classes, and they generally considered it a valuable learning experience that was different than what they typically do.

And to the end, they were still expressing varied opinions about the Bronco Buster:

“They did research and presented it to each other,” Siddons said. “That sculpture is not particularly nuanced, but the more research they did, the more nuanced it became. For example, I had students showing historic photos of Stillwater because they wanted to make the case that this was similar to images that were being produced about Stillwater at the time of its settlement. We had students researching how you cast a bronze sculpture because they happened to be artists, and they wanted to know how the thing got made.”

She added, “As art historians, our lives are spent asking questions. Our whole jobs are why, why, why. That’s productive learning, to have those conversations, and the students didn’t always agree with each other.”