

CURRICULUM MATERIALS: II

ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE “ALTAR PARSIONEROS”



Altar Parsioneros, 2010 | Sgraffito on wood panels with acrylic and acrylic ink
Alice Leora Briggs | Courtesy of Evoke Contemporary, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Overview:

In Alice Leora Briggs' own words:

*In this five-panel tableau, I make use of Jacques Louis David's celebrated painting *The Death of Socrates* to evoke institutional politics of the United States and Mexico. An unshaven Felipe Calderón masquerades as Socrates lying on his bed, waiting for the inevitable cup of poison. Barack Obama plays the part of the wealthy friend, Crito. He beseeches Calderón/Socrates not to kill himself since the world will surely blame Obama/Crito for failing to prevent his suicide.*

Altar Parsioneros pays homage to twelve men who were tortured and murdered, then buried in the back yard of a condo in a middle class neighborhood along Acequia Parsioneros in Juárez. Between August 2003 and January 2004, this residence served as a cartel "death house," featuring a graveyard beneath the patio.

As mentioned in the description above, *Altar Parsioneros* incorporates images from other paintings. The center panel references *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, by Jacques-Louis David. The wings reference two paintings by van der Weyden: *The Magdalen Reading*, before 1438; and *Descent from the Cross*, c. 1435. These are significant in analyzing and understanding the painting. Below we've included images of the referenced paintings and brief descriptions to help in analyzing and understanding Briggs' images. Following these images and descriptions are the lesson activities.

Analysis of Death of Socrates:



The Death of Socrates, 1787 | Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748-1825) | Oil on canvas

The Death of Socrates was painted in 1787 by Jacques-Louis David, a French neoclassicist painter who “championed a style of rigorous contours, sculpted forms, and polished surfaces [and whose] history paintings were intended as moral exemplars.”

This approach is nowhere better evident than in *The Death of Socrates*, where we see that “Accused by the Athenian government of denying the gods and corrupting the young through his teachings, Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) was offered the choice of renouncing his beliefs or dying by drinking a cup of hemlock. David shows him prepared to die and discoursing on the immortality of the soul with his grief-stricken disciples. Painted in 1787, the picture, with its stoic theme, is perhaps David's most perfect Neoclassical statement. The printmaker and publisher John

Boydell wrote to Sir Joshua Reynolds that it was "the greatest effort of art since the Sistine Chapel and the stanze of Raphael."¹



The Magdalen Reading, before 1438 | Rogier van der Weyden

The Magdalen Reading is a “fragment cut from a larger painting, evidently an altarpiece of the Virgin and Child with Saints. It shows Mary Magdalene, with Saint Joseph behind, and the bare feet and red robe of Saint John the Evangelist on the left. The jar in the foreground contains the ointment which Mary Magdalene used to anoint Jesus' feet as she wept over them, repenting of her sins. She subsequently devoted her life to holy works, and is represented reading a holy book. Her clothes are sumptuous: her fur-lined dress is turned back to reveal a bejewelled underdress. The wooden cupboard suggests that the scene was set in a rich domestic interior. The background includes a detailed landscape view.”²



The Descent from the Cross (or, Deposition of Christ) c. 1478 | Rogier van der Weyden

¹ Quoted from Kathryn Calley Galitz, Department of European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in “The Legacy of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825)” and the gallery label of “The Death of Socrates” (www.metmuseum.org).

² Quoted from the National Gallery of London’s image description of *The Magdalen Reading* (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rogier-van-der-veyden-the-magdalen-reading).

Rogier van der Weyden, “...centers his composition on the COMPASSIO MARIAE, the passion felt by the Virgin at the suffering and death of her Son. In order to depict this, the painter chose the moment when Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and a helper hold Jesus’ body in the air and Mary falls to the ground in a faint, where she is held by Saint John and the holy women....Weyden masterfully handles the figures depicted in a limited background space and at the edges, where the opposing and complementary movements of Saint John and Mary Magdalene close the composition. Within this space, an outstanding play of parallel diagonals—in the form of Christ and Mary’s bodies— brings out their double passion. The expressions are striking, as is the contention with which feelings are expressed, and the play of curves and counter-curves that link the figures.”³

Analysis of Significance of Altar Parsioneros:

Like *The Death of Socrates*, Briggs’ painting is making a statement on contemporary politics, specifically the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Calderón takes the place of Socrates, while Crito becomes Obama. Obama is imploring Calderón not to commit political suicide by pursuing the drug cartels, which of course could lead to Calderón’s literal death. Obama fears that the world will blame him, and he wants Calderón to just leave well enough alone. Using the format of an altar scene, Briggs connects the situation with Calderón to that of a crucifixion. Perhaps, Briggs is portraying Calderón as a Christ-like victim, stoically standing up for his beliefs.

The wings reference Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary, again alluding to an altar scene evoking both crucifixion and sacrifice. Typically, the two Marys are always present in traditional representations of the crucifixion, attending to Christ. While they are present in Briggs’ scene, they both communicate what could be interpreted as indifference. Mary Magdalen is reading, while the Virgin Mary dissects a Chihuahua. This could be interpreted as the indifference of the church or religion to the violence and killings in Juárez. It could also speak to our own indifference as witnesses to the inhumanity of the situation in Juárez—while we see it, we do little to change it.

It’s also important to note the two separate scenes within the one image. The foreground, done in light shades, is set in contrast to the darker background scene. Here, we see men being blindly led to the scenes of their own killing at a drug

³ Quoted from the Museo del Prado’s image description of *The Descent of the Cross* (<http://www.museodelprado.es/en/visit-the-museum/15-masterpieces/work-card/obra/descent-from-the-cross/>).

cartel's death houses. This specific death house was a condo in a middle class neighborhood. Again, Briggs alludes to our own complacency or complicitousness in the face of such tragedy.

Discussion Questions:

The following questions can be used to help guide a discussion or analysis of the image. However, it would be best to start this activity by allowing students to spend some time looking at the image, talking about what they see and what they think it may mean. Then, sharing some of the information above as it relates to your purposes in studying the image.

1. What differences do you notice between Briggs' image and *The Death of Socrates*? Crito is looking at Socrates in the original, but where is Obama looking? Do you think this difference is significant? What do you think it means? Socrates and Crito were very close friends; do you think Obama and Calderón have the same relationship?
2. Socrates was given two choices: he could commit suicide by drinking the hemlock or renounce his beliefs. He chose the hemlock. Why do you think Briggs chose this image in which to place Calderón? Was Calderón facing a similar choice? What choice did Calderón have to make? What did he choose? What would you have chosen, if you were in his position?
3. In Briggs' image, Obama is pleading with Calderón not to commit political suicide. Do you think this is because Obama really cares about Calderón? Or does the United States have ulterior motives in terms of the politics of Mexico?
4. Look at the four individuals included in the foreground. Trace their line of sight. Are any of them actually looking at another person, or even out at the viewer? Do you think this is important? What do you think it means?
5. Briggs includes both Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary in the wings of the picture. Why do you think she chose to include these religious icons? What does their body language communicate? Do they seem aware or invested in what is going on in the painting?
6. Look at the background images. What is happening in this part of the painting? Why do you think Briggs chose to do these in darker shades? Darker sometimes conveys a sense of shadow—what could that represent in this image?

7. Imagine you are in the scene as one of the blindfolded men. How would you feel? What would you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Feel?
8. Why do you think Briggs chose to document this scene in particular? What purpose does the image serve?
9. Why do you think Briggs chose to put these two different stories from the foreground and background images together?