

Management Leadership and Literature Course

As the financial crisis unfolded, Professor Shyam Sunder, the James L. Frank Professor of Accounting, Economics, and Finance at the Yale School of Management, grew increasingly concerned with what he considered the failure of business education to develop reflective leadership qualities in students. He decided to look to the humanities, with the idea that, in thinking, speaking, and writing about values, aspirations, and attitudes, the students might better cultivate leadership skills, such as communication and creativity.

Professor Sunder first turned to literature, theater, and film but soon became an enthusiastic proponent of bringing his students to the Yale University Art

Gallery to engage with original works of art. Every fall since 2011, he has brought his classes to the museum as part of his innovative seminar Management Leadership and Literature. As a world-renowned accounting theorist and experimental economist, Professor Sunder admits that his expertise runs more to statistical theory of valuation and design of electronic markets than Abstract Expressionism or classical sculpture, but he is a passionate museum visitor. “Art makes us think,” Sunder explains. “It introduces us to new ways of seeing things. That is important because it is all too easy for most of us to fall into familiar ways of thinking about the world around us.

New ways of thinking are critical for leadership in management, and sometimes it is easier to see this when we operate outside our own immediate context.”

David Odo, the Bradley Assistant Curator of Academic Affairs, and Molleen Theodore, the Gallery’s former Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Senior Fellow in the Education Department and current Assistant Curator of Programs, a new position funded by Jane and Gerald Katcher, have worked with Professor Sunder to help his students move away from their comfort zones and encourage them to consider art and artists who have changed the way we see the world. Looking closely at masterpieces



Molleen Theodore teaching with Vincent van Gogh’s *Le café de nuit* (The Night Café; 1888)



David Odo teaching with the Assyrian reliefs (883–859 B.C.)

from the collection—such as Benjamin West’s monumental historical painting *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768) and Vincent van Gogh’s vivid *Le café de nuit* (The Night Café; 1888)—students are given a framework for approaching art. They learn to focus on what they see, begin to develop a vocabulary to discuss their observations, and begin to draw parallels between artistic innovation and leadership in a business context.

Students then select a work in the Gallery’s collection for their own study. At the conclusion of the semester, they submit an essay and give a presentation in the museum about their chosen work, discussing how it demonstrates

an aspect of leadership and how the object helped them to reflect on their own qualities of leadership. As Nickolaus Groh, M.B.A. 2013, a recent seminar participant who is now working as a strategist for a technology firm, says, “The final project was thought-provoking, engaging, and well outside the conventional notions of business training. More specifically, it highlighted how adding value to business and society requires more than acquiring and distributing isolated sets of information. Tomorrow’s thought leaders must master more nuanced concepts, including interpretation, reflection, and active curiosity.”