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Debra Henning: What's In A Word? Cross-Curricular Instruction and Assessment in the Arts

[Debra Henning](#) [adrian villar rojas](#), [arts assessments](#), [arts education](#), [arts integration](#), [cross-curricular connections](#), [frank gehry](#), [iwan baan](#), [language arts](#), [louis vuitton](#), [MAEIA assessments](#), [martin agryoglo](#), [paris](#), [social studies](#), [visual arts](#), [where the slaves live](#)

The following post offers an example of the manner in which MAEIA's "Cross-Curricular Connections Assessment," V.T 312 for Grade 8, can encourage students to think deeply about connections between the visual arts and language. In the assessment, students are asked to create an artwork that connects the principles and subject matter of another academic subject of their choice to the visual arts. The assessment item assesses several visual arts standards, including students' ability to "effectively analyze and describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in school are interrelated with the visual arts, as well as their ability to "relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding."



Martin Argyroglo, "Adrian Villar Rojas -Where the slaves live © Fondation Louis Vuitton," photograph, Forgemind Archimedia, Licensed for noncommercial use under Creative Commons.

A picture, we know, is worth a thousands words. But what's the worth of a word? That depends, of course, on the word. Does it refer to a specific object, such as the tallest building in the world, or to something more general, as the word buildings does? In

the vast hierarchy of words – call them concepts, if you like – few words encompass more meaning than vernacular. Commonly defined as “the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people in a particular country or region,” the word, vernacular stands in contrast to literary or cultured language, most frequently to Latin. Carried throughout the Great Roman Empire, the Latin language served as a unifying force in law and religion, yet less so in the everyday lives of the people, who continued to find linguistic expression in their own mother-tongue. In a slow give-and-take process, aided by the translation of the Bible into English and by patriotic stirrings, the vernacular would emerge supreme as the mother-tongue in England, France, and Germany grew from spoken dialects into full-fledged languages, “adequate for the expression of any and every kind of thought.”

In the centuries-long evolution of language, however, the meaning of vernacular, itself, became something quite different from its origins. Which is why Adrian Villar Rojas’ sculpture, “Where the Slaves Live” makes such an intriguing subject for cross-curricular instruction in the arts. The title of the massive “living sculpture,” composed of multiple layers of earth and manufactured materials, recalls the Latin root of the word vernacular, i.e., verna, meaning a home-born slave, and, hence, language of the home-born slave.

Like the sculpture commissioned by France’s Fondation Louis Vuitton, Roja’s concept for the sculpture layers multiple meanings. “Where the Slaves Lives” confronts visitors with a silent reminder of France’s vacillating opposition to slavery, which the French abolished, re-established, and in 1848 again re-

abolished in her colonies. On the terrace of Frank Gehry's magnificent glass ship, Rojas's sculpture recalls the ships that carried slaves and the fate of many at sea.

Set in a building that is synonymous with wealth, privilege, and luxury goods, Rojas' work has the potential to stir the kind of debate and reflection intended by the mission of Fondation Louis Vuitton. By using the word as Rojas does – as a reminder that in verna and vernacular, slavery is at the core of the French language and the mission of L' Academie Francaise – the artist ramps up the potential for debate and reflection. Today, one of the aims of the Academie is to “protect the French language from foreign, notably ‘Anglo-Saxon’ invasions,” but that goal has not always been central to its mission. Since its founding in 1635, the Academie has been tasked with a much more fundamental aim: to guide the French language from “from the vulgar (or vernacular) state of language to that of language equal in dignity to Latin.” As used by the Academie, the words vulgar and vernacular become synonymous, both meaning “the common or usual language of a country; both obscuring the meaning of verna – a home-born slave. In “Where the Slaves Live,” Roja recovers the origins of vernacular, while delivering a powerful message about the hidden history of language and the importance of cross-curricular instruction.



The Fondation Louis Vuitton,
Designed by the Canadian-American Architect, Frank Gehry and Located in Paris, France
Iwan Baan, Frank Gehry – Fondation Louis Vuitton, 2014, Photo 12, Forgemind Archmedia

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