

# *Curricular Encounters with Linda Stein's Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*

Karen Keifer-Boyd, Cheri Ehrlich,  
Ann Holt, Wanda B. Knight, Yen-Ju Lin,  
Adetty Pérez de Miles, Leslie Sotomayor

Encounters with art are pedagogical. This essay introduces curricular encounters with *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females – Tapestries and Sculpture by Linda Stein*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of curricular encounters with Stein's work is to (re)imagine what global citizenship can be, and to highlight the role of art and education toward social justice.

Linda Stein began *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* (H2F2), in 2011, after reading an obituary in *The New York Times*, “Nancy Wake, Proud Spy and Nazi Foe, Dies at 98.”<sup>2</sup> Stein's drive to create art is based upon a deep concern for the well-being of all, an ethics of affirmation, and a desire to protect and be protected from all forms of violence – emotional, physical, institutional, environmental, and systemic. Stein's tapestries and sculpture are both visual and visceral narratives of identity, leadership, and social justice.<sup>3</sup> The art in the H2F2 exhibition calls for people to be *upstanders*.<sup>4</sup> An upstander joins with others, or stands alone, to protect others from violent circumstances in everyday experiences, such as bullying.

A team of art curriculum scholars and practitioners – with expertise in kindergarten through higher education teaching, museum education, information communication technologies, and social justice curriculum – have developed curricular encounters with the art in the H2F2 exhibition. Curriculum is not static, but changes with questions of knowledge: For whom? When is it true? Where is it situated? The online generative living curriculum for the H2F2 exhibition addresses the Social Justice Research Agenda set forth by the 2014 National Art Education Association Research Commission. The Commission's agenda is to “prepare art educators to respect and teach content based on social justice [and] promote understandings of diversity with regard to sexual orientation, cultural identity, religious beliefs, and other areas where prejudice and marginalization may exist.”<sup>5</sup> Those who do not have access to seeing the actual exhibition will be able to view the work in a virtual gallery space, in which the art can be seen close up and from different angles.<sup>6</sup> When encountering the art online, questions, prompts, and intertextual materials appear as pop-ups. The prompts focus on upstander identity, leadership, and social justice. The purpose of the *H2F2 Encounters* website is to facilitate agency, empowerment, and reflection.

H2F2 curricular encounters are designed to be encounters with specific works or with a series of works in the H2F2 exhibition. Each



FIG. 31. Anne Frank tapestry Encounters website image with prompt: "Our many Jewish friends and acquaintances are being taken away in droves (Anne Frank, October 9, 1942) / How could the past inform the present, so that people could be welcomed home?"

encounter begins with looking at, discussing and experiencing Stein's tapestries and sculpture. These interactions may involve making art, or other sensory processes, as a way to engage with Stein's art in relation to self as situated in current social, political, and environmental contexts. Encounters with the H2F2 exhibition, presented in this essay and at the Encounters website, provide experiences that extend from, and then return to, Linda Stein's art.

Encounters with H2F2 offer ways to examine cultural-historical roots of social and environmental degradation, and to motivate upstander actions in (re)making community. Several encounters investigate visual culture as a means of communicating and perpetuating cultural values. Other encounters explore the ways in which visual culture affects perceptions of self and the world, and constructs power and privilege. The encounters are processes to analyze media, advertisements, photographs, alternative media, objects, spaces, places, signs and codes as sources of power, as well as to de/en/re/code dominant cultural narratives.

Underlying all encounters is the concept of *teaching toward understanding the value of*

*diversity* (e.g., culture, ethnicity, religion, race, gender, sexuality, and ability) and understanding that everyone is responsible for the well-being of others.<sup>7</sup> The following are ways to encounter the H2F2 tapestries and sculpture as catalysts toward social justice education.

Identity is formed and maintained through the meanings of cultural artifacts. After viewing the short video of Linda Stein's *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*<sup>8</sup> and, in particular, the *Spoon to Shell* series, identify a significant cultural artifact and consider contemporary meanings encoded in this cultural artifact. For example, a seashell is a protective outer layer created by an animal that lives in the sea. A shell can have various meanings. It can be a home, a dish, a spoon, a cutting or polishing tool, body adornment, an exoskeleton, or a source of protection. From where do the meanings associated with the cultural artifact arise?

For Stein, in her *Spoon to Shell* series, the narrative of a woman's experience being offered a spoon for sexual favors moved Stein to explore the spoon as a cultural artifact. When the only food substance is watery gruel in a bowl shared with many others, a spoon is a survival tool. Such was the case for people forced into concentration camps who feared transmission of tuberculosis, typhoid, and other diseases when placing their lips on the brim of a shared bowl. In refusing the spoon, offered by the man in return for sexual favors, the woman's life was in danger as the man doing the offering held power over her fate to live or die. Stein asks: *What would you do in such a situation? How do you keep your self-respect and survive?*<sup>9</sup> Agency can be a form of resistance or an act of opposition to force or power. Acts of agency and resistance may be subversive or obedient, overt or covert, or individual or collective.

The *Identity Exploration with Cultural Artifacts* encounter, with the *Spoon to Shell* series, begins with a discussion, while looking at the art, with others whose social class, age, gender, sexuality, and ethnic background differs from one's own.<sup>10</sup> To interpret a cultural artifact, it is important

to look at conditions for its production as they relate to socio-economic class structures, gender-role expectations, and specific visual codes of the time, as well as how those codes have changed over time. Using *Regender*,<sup>11</sup> read articles that are regendered – about the cultural artifacts – to discern whether and how the meaning has changed. Look again at each work in the *Spoon to Shell* series. What does the spoon signify in relation to the shells and text fragments and other items in this box assemblage (fig. 32)? The uniformity of the twenty black wooden, box sculptures brings order and calm to the chaos, fragments, and tensions that are visible from the window of each box. Stein uses spoons and shells as metaphors for power and vulnerability. Select a cultural artifact. Juxtapose it amongst other objects within a box sculpture. Investigate these cultural artifacts from a rhizome of associations and memories in an exploration of power, privilege, oppression, bigotry, leadership, and identity.

### **Tapestries Encounters Honor Heroes Around/Within Us**

Feminist leaders recognize that some groups suffer disadvantages as a consequence of their gender, race, class, language, age,

sexuality, religion, nationality, or ability. Stein's tapestries concern heroes who challenge and change evil/violent/power-making conditions and circumstances to realize a just and compassionate world. The heroes honored in each of the 10 tapestries saved lives and risked their own lives to do so. The purpose of several of the curricular encounters with Stein's tapestries is to learn about acts of agency and resistance by women who stood up for change during the WWII Holocaust. Each person honored by Linda's Stein's tapestries is a hero and, by extension, is a leader and a role model. Leadership can be everyday actions or passionate activism that advances social justice.

Stein's tapestries draw attention to fragments of life, using collage as a way to juxtapose, overlap, layer, hide, and reveal relationships. In a close view of the tapestries, for example, what meanings are possible when considering the juxtaposition of calico cotton next to black leather? Both could be fragments from aprons that, when placed together, suggest different kinds of service work that women have performed, including domestic work and sex-work. Look closely at each element and consider all of the possible meanings. Next, consider how each meaning is developed in relationship to other elements in the tapestry.

From reading the essays in this book and looking at the *H2F2* tapestries, one can learn about the lives and actions of the women, and the context of their lives. *The Hero Around/Within Us* encounter with *H2F2* tapestries is a catalyst to create a collage honoring a woman who has made courageous decisions toward furthering social justice.

### **Wonder Woman Protector Sculpture and Tapestries Encounters:**

**Justice and Upstander Narratives**  
Women, transgender people, ethnic groups, people with (dis)abilities, and children have continually been subject to the violent and unjust realities of sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and patriarchy. Social justice is first and foremost about



**FIG. 32.** *Spoon to Shell* series Encounters website image with prompt. “What does the spoon signify in relation to the shells and text fragments and other items in this box assemblage?”

changing inequities and marginalization. An encounter, called *Welcome Home*,<sup>12</sup> uses the Anne Frank tapestry and begins with reading excerpts from her diary, along with current news reports concerning groups of people seeking safety in a foreign land.<sup>13</sup> The current news could be juxtaposed with film images from *Voyage of the Damned*, a film, based on the 1939 true story of the *S.S. St. Louis*, a ship with many Jewish passengers, traveling from Germany to Cuba. The Jews were refused entry to Cuba and then by the US, when the captain subsequently tried to land in Florida. Forced to return to Germany, some passengers chose suicide over the inevitable concentration camps. Finally, passengers received news of shared asylum granted by Belgium, France, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Without this end, Hitler's genocide would only have been justified by the anti-Semitism existing beyond his borders. How could the past inform the present, so that people could be welcomed home (fig. 31)? Create a collage, which includes news images from the past and present, along with diary entries, that brings a personal perspective to current and historical events about the desire to be welcomed home. Seeking and learning about a diverse range of life narratives prompts an empathetic process of understanding injustice within the complexities of environments and communities.

Guided by the interactive prompts overlaid on the digitized tapestries on the Encounters website, explore Stein's use of feminist pop culture and religious icons such as Wonder Woman, Kannon, and Mononoke - who personify the values of empowerment, strength, justice, and protection. In this H2F2 encounter, answer the following questions: *Who are upstanders? What can I learn from upstander role models and their actions? What can I do, personally, to be an upstander on an everyday basis?* An encounter with H2F2, called *Upstander Narratives*, involves creating a graphic novel/cartoon that incorporates self-narratives of real and/or imagined experiences. What if each of Stein's fierce feminist leaders simultaneously had a prominent seat at the table on the national and world stage? What if all stood up when they were told to sit down? What if all spoke out,

when they were told to be quiet? What if . . . ? Further, identify and reflect on people who have demonstrated actions of protection, equality, and justice. Imagine the heroes and icons in Stein's artwork as animated and conversant life guides, shamans, or protectors. Compose a graphic narrative that portrays a problem that needs to be solved, which can be based on social injustice experienced or witnessed. Compose new text-bubbles, as does Stein in her art, to voice upstander concerns.

### **A Manifesto for Future Encounters**

Artists and educators have an indispensable role to play in advocating for just and equitable futures for all. The following are *upstander* strategies for artists and teachers:

**Be Bold!** Bring to the forefront the political, effective, and ethical dimension of education into your (our) art and teaching practice.

**Be Fierce!** Use the saturation of images in everyday life and visual culture to fight complacency and disillusionment through creative art interventions. Harness ways to rethink oppressive, unthinkable conditions to create sites of action, empowerment, and agency. Linda Stein's work is a paradigmatic example.

**Be Indignant!** unflinching about the rights of people to demand an ethic based on social interdependence, social responsibility, and planetary interconnectivity with regard to education, dignity, peace, and happiness.

**Be a Brave Upstander!** about all human suffering, and audaciously provide the necessary tools to help others (e.g., our students); understand and confront how the extant political, economic, and social conditions enable and constrain structural violence at all levels of society.

Fierce feminist leaders stand up for justice. They believe they can be agents of change to transform structural barriers that deny equitable opportunities and circumstances for all to thrive and achieve in a world free from oppression. ■

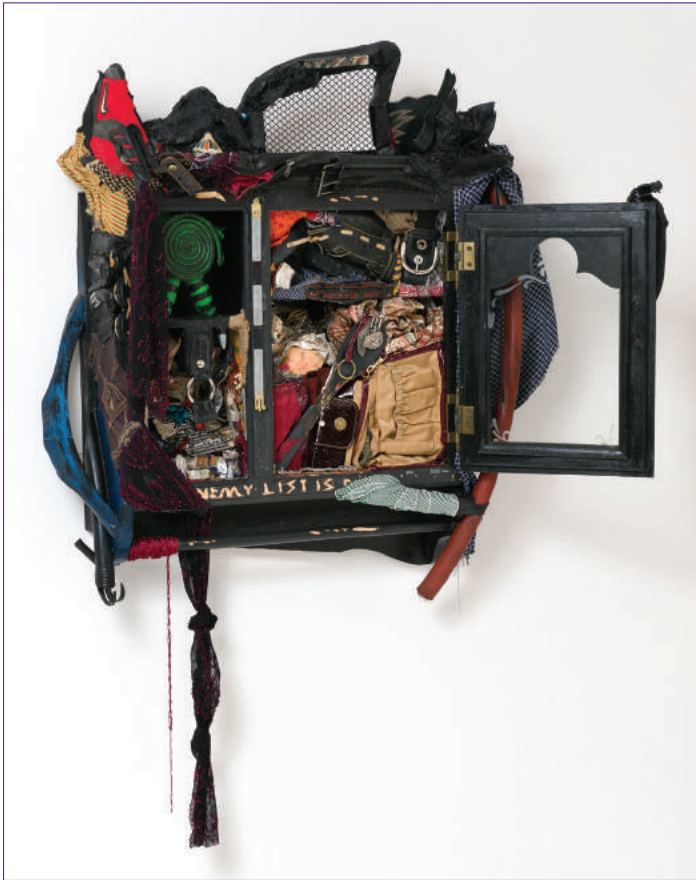


FIG. 33. Three works from the series *Cabinets, Cupboards, Cases and Closets*, 2015. Top left: *Brought/Left Behind* 856. Wood, metal, fabric, and mixed media; closed: 47 x 30 x 11 inches, mostly opened: 47 x 33 x 16 inches. Top right: *Four Stories* 862. Wood, fabric, metal, and mixed media; closed: 40½ x 13½ x 8 inches, mostly opened 40½ x 21 x 13 inches. Bottom: *Caged Compartment* 855. Wood, metal, fabric, and mixed media; closed: 9 x 9 x 3 inches, mostly opened: 9 x 17 x 7 inches.