
Expressing Meaning Through Art

Objective: To engage with and reflect on the ethical dimensions of the human experience through the exploration of Samuel Bak's paintings. There are three short essay options below. You will pick 2 out of the following 3 writing prompts. If you submit essays on all three, only the first two will be graded (though doing all three will ✨dazzle✨ me). There is also an example of what I'm looking for below.

Due Date: The due date for this assignment is stated on Canvas. *Any submissions after this date will be subjected to a 10%-off-per-day penalty.*

Museum Visit: As a class, we will visit the Samuel Bak Museum in Aksarben. The address is [2289 S 67th St. Omaha, NE 68106](#). The chief curator, Alexandra Cardon, will lead us in a discussion of Bak's work and life. This information will help guide you as you view the many pieces that are on display.

Grading: The assignment is worth 50 points. Grades for each essay will depend on the thoughtfulness and depth of analysis. Additionally, the creativity and originality of your reflections and analysis of Bak's work will be key. Finally, the clarity of your writing is extremely important for my understanding of your essays.

Prompt 1:

- Choose two pieces of artwork from different styles, or time periods within the museum collection.
- Reflect on the diversity of artistic expression and its potential to convey different messages. Consider how cultural and historical contexts influence your interpretation of Bak's art.
- Distill your reflections and considerations into a 500 word short essay.

Prompt 2:

- Choose two pieces of artwork from different styles, or time periods within the museum collection. (If you are also doing Prompt 1, then you need to pick two *different* pieces for this assignment)
- Analyze how Bak's unique style and themes contribute to his narrative.
- Distill your reflections and considerations into a 500 word short essay.

Prompt 3:

- Watch [this](#) short explanation by Bak about his painting *The Warsaw Boy*.
- Examine and analyze *The Warsaw Boy* in the museum.
- Reflect on what Bak intended to convey with this painting and compare / contrast this with what the painting evokes in you.
- Distill your reflection into a 500 word short essay.

Bak Museum Assignment - Example

Prompt 1:



The chosen artworks are Samuel Bak's *Creation of Wartime III* (Later referenced as *Wartime*) and one of his drawings from the *Landscapes of Jewish History* collection (Later referenced as *Jewish History*). The first mentioned artwork is made between 1999 and 2008, while the piece from the *Landscapes of Jewish History* collection is from 1977. This makes a two decade difference between the two artworks, while another distinctive difference is materials used by Samuel Bak. The chronologically first piece, being the *Jewish History* drawing, is made with charcoal on paper. This gives it a more rough look, while also ensuring that the piece is completely black and white. The charcoal on paper gives off a way different look than the oil on canvas that is used on the other artwork, *Wartime*. The oil creates the opportunity to use colors, which Samuel Bak utilizes to his full advantage. Overall the oil on canvas makes the painting both more complex and interesting, but it is fascinating that it also makes the painting come across as more soft and forgiving.

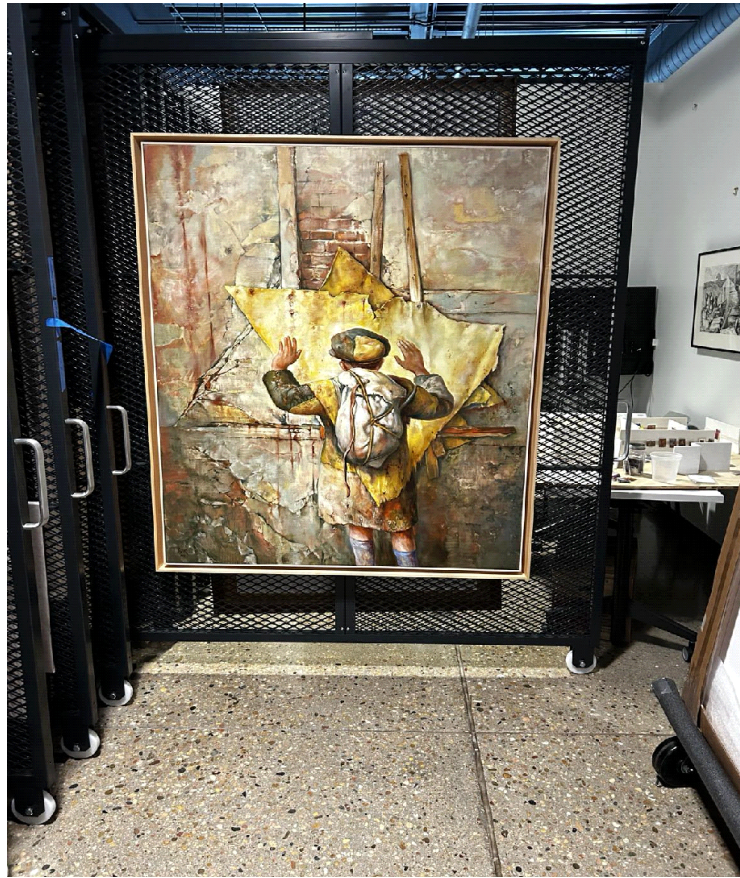
The two pieces of artwork beautifully convey the process of grief, anger, and sorrow. The first artwork, made closest to the horrible actions of the Holocaust shows sadness and hopelessness. The drawing consists of the two plaques with the ten commandments written on them. Plenty of Samuel Bak's art showcases these specific plaques in different states. He cleverly uses the plaques and therefore also the ten commandments as the blueprint of human

morality, especially regarding the Holocaust, where a majority of the ten commandments were being horrifically violated by both the Nazis and the Capos that were helping the Nazis.

In this specific drawing of the plaques, they have visibly been destroyed before they have been partly put together. Multiple big cracks and slits are still extremely visible, while the big pieces of the plaques are being held together by additional small pieces. This symbolizes a partial healing that is still in the process of regaining the function of before the incident. Samuel Bak is trying to showcase how he and his people desperately want to believe in the morality of mankind, but the cracks that the Holocaust caused are still deep and not just forgettable right away.

The *Wartime* painting shares the religious theme, since it is drawing inspiration from Michelangelo's meeting between Adam and God. This symbol from 1512 was used by the Nazis as propaganda alongside various similar works of art from the Middle Ages. Samuel Bak manages to regain the power that was taken from his and his people during the Holocaust by using this motive as his inspiration. However, some major differences between the original work and Bak's is that Bak's "Adam" is actually a prisoner of war, while "God" is merely a cutout in the wall - in other words, an illusion. This might showcase how the Holocaust victim probably had a hard time believing in God while being prisoners since their experiences were so extremely inhumane.

The two artwork portrays different messages while still covering the same topic and being fairly similar in the sense of having God and religion as their starting point. Religion is a major theme, as well as pre-historic knowledge when trying to interpret the meaning of Bak's artwork. If an individual were lacking the knowledge of Middle-age artwork and the Nazi regime, it wouldn't be capable of fully understanding the meaning. Such an individual might be able to come up with their own message, but it probably wouldn't be close to the one that Bak intended.

Prompt 3:

Samuel Bak's work of *The Warsaw Boy* portrays a Jewish boy standing in front of a crumbling brick wall, with his hands up like he is surrendering himself to the enemy. All of this while he is partly covered by a Star of David. The boy is looking away from the painter and the viewer of the painting, which means his identity is hidden. He looks fairly young while also looking poor. His clothes, like his pants, look as if they are slowly falling apart.

When Samuel Bak himself talks about his paintings of *The Warsaw Boy* he seems to have plenty of sympathy and empathy for the boy. This is probably due to the fact, that Samuel Bak might as well could have been the boy in the picture and his paintings. They were both around the same age, while being in the same situation by being Jewish in antisemitic Europe. Samuel Bak also talks about the ghettos where he and his family and loved ones would find themselves. These ghettos seem to be very similar to the background in the painting of *The Warsaw Boy*, since the outer layer of the brick wall is peeling off because of the numerous cracks in the wall.

It is especially remarkable how the boy in the painting is all alone. There seems to be no one around him, like parents or likewise, to take care of him. The young boy is simply forced to grow up way too early and under way too harsh conditions. The fact that his back is turned towards the viewers and his identity therefore is hidden, means that this boy could have been anyone. The only identification regarding him is the Star of David, that symbolizes his beliefs in the Jewish religion. This loss of identity can mean one of two things, possibly both. It is either done to portray how the Nazis did not care about the identities of their victims, as long as they were Jewish. It can also symbolize a whole population of Jews, instead of just this one boy. Since so many people, including children, faced the same, horrible destiny, the portrayal of just one boy without an identity could show the fate of the whole Jewish population.

I believe the main feeling that the painting evokes in me is loneliness. With that loneliness comes a sense of hopelessness. Who is gonna help the boy? He seems to be all alone in the world. The boy already gave up and chose to surrender. He is not capable of escaping his fate as a Jew, since the Star of David seems to be melting on to him - that is the only part of his identity that matters and is visible to the viewer.

Obviously, I can't relate to the boy's situation and it doesn't feel as personal to me, as it does to Samuel bak due to personal experiences. I believe that's the main difference between what and how it evokes something in him and in me - purely based on our past experiences.