

# To Be Human

by Ellie Smith (English '23)

Art, culture, and language. Faculty in the College of Humanities use all of these and more to better understand what it means to be human.



William Glackens. *Family Group*, 1910–11. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

**T**he College of Humanities constantly evaluates what it means to be human. What better way to ponder that question than through the most moving humanistic subjects: culture, language, art, literature, philosophy, history, and religion. These subjects reveal the most about what it means to be ourselves and why that matters. Simply put, they analyze the human condition.

The College utilizes a variety of approaches in this study, but each one emphasizes the same core competencies—cultural navigation, communication, and information literacy—to better understand and navigate the human

condition. For example, Visiting Assistant Professor Jarron Slater (Rhetoric, Professional Communication) says, “The humanities are a process of educating people so they can act and live in accordance with their true nature, a nature shared by all human beings.” Human nature is woven through all aspects of culture, from language to religion; hence, human nature provides a perfect framework to discuss the goings-on in the College.

## Language and Culture

Across the College, faculty use language and culture as a way to connect meaningfully with

their research. For example, 71 languages are analyzed and taught regularly in the College, and 35 majors are offered—most of them language focused. Professor Matthew Christensen (Chinese) says, “Humanities is the study of human nature and human interaction and what makes us all human. And foreign languages and literature are all about understanding other people from other cultures.”

However, connection does not come from simply speaking the same language as someone else. Assistant Professor Jim Law (Historical Linguistics) spoke of the need for education to connect people. “We cannot

understand a people without understanding their language: not just how to speak it, read it, or sign it but also its structure, its rhetorical patterns, its artistry and diversity. The humanities offer us a language-shaped window through which to see the people of the world more clearly.” With more language programs at BYU than most universities, faculty can look through many different windows. Adjunct Faculty Joyce Guidi (French) reaffirmed this idea. “It is absolutely amazing to be working with people from such a huge variety of cultures every single day and learning from them. That is something I would be less exposed to in any other college.”

People understand more about themselves as they teach their language to others, something seen prominently in the English Language Center. The center provides a laboratory school for teachers learning to teach English to speakers of other languages, as well as high-quality English language instruction for students desiring to learn English and improve their English language skills. The English Language Center program coordinator, Ben McMurry (English Language Teaching and Learning), put it this way, “We think of the humanities as students coming to the university to learn, but really what we are doing that makes BYU so unique is we are providing an opportunity for our students to teach.”

Computer programming languages offer another perspective of humanity. Tory Anderson, the senior web application developer for the Office of Digital Humanities, says, “Working in digital humanities, I like to think we are riding the crest of up-and-coming humanities. By virtue of my work and research, I

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get to straddle humanities and computer science, where humanities provide the question-asking power and computer science provides the question-answering power. As computer solutions become increasingly accessible to the masses, humanities are more important than ever to see that those solutions are ethical and meaningful.”

The study of culture weaves through the study of language—often in collaboration with scholars across disciplines. Professor Jennifer Bown (Second Language Acquisition) says, “The term *humanities* suggests that we

study humanity: its achievements, its culture, its enduring questions. But the study of humans is broad. As a linguist, I study language but often use social science methods to do so, and I have collaborated on research with faculty members from around the university, including from the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences and the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences.

“One of my recent projects involves the ways in which ethnic group affiliation might be affected by geopolitics. Together with colleagues in Linguistics, we are studying how the war in Ukraine has affected ethnic Russians living in former Soviet countries.”

### **Art and Literature**

Though the study of art is particularly emphasized in the Department of Comparative Arts & Letters (art history is housed in the department), faculty throughout the College study art and its role in culture and society. Art can evoke empathy for others, teach about different cultures, and promote unity. Associate dean and professor Corry Cropper (French) explains, “The humanities allow us to grapple with complicated issues and get away from the ‘us against them’ mentality that dominates social media. Reading literature, studying art, and learning about cultures help us develop charity, ‘the greatest of all’ gifts.”

Cinema, another artistic form, captures and displays emotion in a visually powerful medium. Film is used to express personal experiences from people around the globe, and International Cinema brings those films to faculty and students at BYU. The program also holds regular lectures on Wednesday evenings to provide context and analysis on the films.

Professor Julie Allen (European Silent Film, Danish Literature), an author of several books about silent cinema, says, “The humanities give color and meaning to our world; flesh out abstract philosophical, economic, and political questions with stories of real people; and help us appreciate the diversity of God’s creations. Even in black-and-white silent films, the centrality and vibrancy of people’s lived experiences—of love, loss, joy, fear, pain, and delight—is what speaks to viewers’ hearts and minds across time, space, and cultural divides.” Cinema reaches a wide audience; the diverse international films provide context for other cultures.

Pop culture combines art and literature into exciting new expressions of humanity. The study of pop culture aims to remind students of the importance of choosing media critically. Visiting Instructor Joseph Darowski (Pop Culture Studies) says, “We can gain empathy and understanding through the stories we consume. Popular culture surrounds us, and being able to think critically about the media around us is vital, no matter what role we find ourselves in.”

Of course, these stories are found in literature, myths, and legends. Creation stories can help people understand where they came from and examine their purpose in life. Slater suggests that the divine nature of all humans, our status as children of God, is what connects humankind.

He says, “We understand that it is not just our humanity that we have in common but our divine potential as future heirs of eternal life. To discover what makes us human is at the same time to discover our innate and potential divinity. From this perspective, the common story that unites us all as human beings is the story that we all lived together in the premortal life, that we exercised faith in Jesus Christ there, and that we are here on earth to again exercise faith in Christ, repent, and participate in God’s work.”

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This perspective suggests that our potential, not just our divine heritage, defines us as humans. Slater emphasizes that understanding naturally influences our actions. “Seeing one another as fellow children of God helps us in our interactions with one another. When we see not only the humanity of one another but the potential divinity of one another, we are led to be kinder, more forgiving, more respectful, and more charitable.”

The study of literature, of course, is foundational throughout the College. Scholars dig deep into literary analysis to learn about the human condition, but they also analyze literature to help teach critical thinking and communication skills and even dive into cultural analysis. Such study elevates both faculty and students. Associate Professor Jamie Horrocks (Victorian Studies) explains, “Because consuming literature and art means being required to think the thoughts—experience the experiences—of other people, the humanities have helped me to see beyond myself and to appreciate that my perceptions are just that, my perceptions, limited by my own biases and cultural ideologies. To use Toni Morrison’s famous analogy, the humanities have taught me to see both the bowl and the fish rather than simply being entertained by the latter.”

Understanding other people enables outreach and empathy. In these acts of kindness, people connect, and in connection lies humanity.



Vincent van Gogh. *The Olive Orchard*, 1889. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

### Philosophy, History, and Religion

In the Philosophy Department, students ask big questions with abstract answers. These questions often revolve around humankind's past and the concepts that inform religion. Associate Professor David Jensen (Ethics and Value Theory) explains that understanding the humanities helps us understand religion. "Philosophy is a discipline that studies our most fundamental concepts and principles, things like beauty, truth, morality, personhood, existence, knowledge, and so forth. As it turns out, religious teachings and questions often share an abstract and nonempirical character with philosophy.

The philosophical study of our intellectual bedrock—the study of questions about truth, knowledge, morality, the purpose of life, and so forth—can therefore help us better understand gospel principles and commitments."

All study at BYU is influenced by religious beliefs, so when examining all of these facets to the humanities, Assistant Professor Cherice Montgomery (Spanish Pedagogy) reminds students that religion is what makes the humanities at BYU special: "One of the most unique features of the humanities programs at BYU is their persistent invitations to students to integrate learning by study and also by faith. The faculty research that feeds the humanities programs at BYU is also incredibly creative. As a result, I think our programs engage students in intriguing ways that inspire testimony, illuminate possibilities for social change, and encourage innovation."

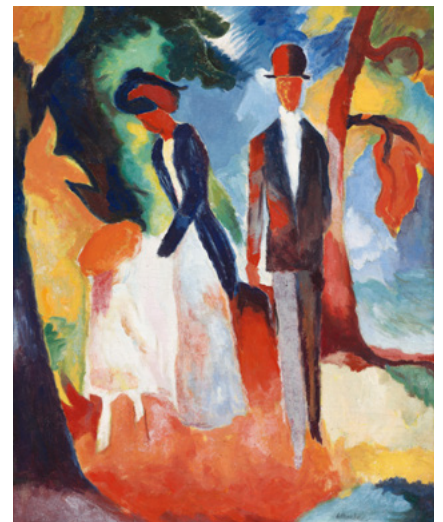
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Historical study informs scholarly understanding of most subjects; linguists look into how words form over time; art historians see how people create based upon what they have learned from past artists; philosophers examine how ideas of the past have influenced the current state of countries today. Assistant Professor Kevin Blankinship (Arabic Language and Literature) says, "Religion is the root of culture. It was religion that shaped society for most of human history. Cities were built around temples and mosques. Parties were thrown for religious holidays (the word *holiday* itself means 'holy day' or 'sabbath'). Music, art, grammar, and philosophy began as expressions of faith and tools for reading sacred texts. And the list goes on."

Relating this idea back to BYU, Blankinship says, "Given religion's huge impact on history and culture, plus the fact that BYU students typically think about and practice religious ideas in their daily lives, those students are readier than almost any college population to study past peoples and cultures. This also means that BYU humanities can plunge deeper into its subject matter than most topflight secular schools, where students may struggle to grasp how faith could be the force behind literature, art, and thought from the past. Ignoring religion in culture and society robs the humanities of their power, just as acknowledging the role of religion enriches and fulfills the humanities as only a faith-based life can."

### What It Means to Be a Human

So just what are the humanities? Culture, language, art, literature, philosophy, history, and religion are the base subjects, but by expanding on them in numerous creative ways (think International Cinema, the Office of Digital Humanities, and the English Language Center), these subjects compose our study of what it means to be human. That lies at the heart of the humanities. Assistant Professor Johnny Allred (English) sums it up nicely: "I have seen how a study of the humanities can connect young people across time and cultures, expanding their worldviews and providing a space for powerful discussions of morality, friendship, love, and courage. We need the humanities, perhaps now more than ever." 📖



August Macke. *People by the Blue Lake*, 1913. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington