



New Student Reading 2013-2014

HISTORY, ART, and ACTION

The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom
by Marcus Rediker

THE CLASS

The New Student Seminar (SAHS-UE1), a required course for all new students, will help you become familiar with the University, the Steinhardt School, and your program of study. Students are introduced to the nature of higher education, student life, and the process of using a text to learn about and reflect upon our society. This year we seek to learn what history, the arts, and activism can teach us about freedom and social change.

THE BOOK

In Marcus Rediker's *The Amistad Rebellion*, the author shows us how a small group of courageous men fought and won an epic battle against Spanish and American slaveholders and their governments. The book brings the Africans, their captors, and abolitionist allies to life in vividly drawn portraits. Rediker tells the story of how the rebels captured the popular imagination and helped to inspire and build a movement that was part of a grand, global struggle against slavery. The book offers a broad and timely examination of freedom.

The Amistad Rebellion is one of the best-known events in the history of American slavery. The subject of movies, books, and Hale Woodruff's monumentally epic murals, the Amistad Rebellion narrative has made an indelible mark on American culture.

HISTORY

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Signed by Abraham Lincoln, the Proclamation declared, "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery in all States in the nation, it changed the minds and hearts of millions of Americans and transformed the course of the Civil War.

ART

Historical forces, trends, and political movements shape art. Hale Woodruff, who served as a professor of art at NYU Steinhardt, encouraged his students to study their heritage "from which they might learn a sense of artistic structure unlike that of any other art." Woodruff, whose Amistad murals will be on display at 80 Washington Square East Gallery, July 20-October 13, 2013, painted himself into the Amistad trial. Perhaps it was his way of signaling that artist and audience alike are a part of the large, historic battle for equality and civil rights.

ACTION

On the moonless night of July 2, 1832, after four days at sea, four captive Africans—there were 53 captives on board—rose up, killed the captain of the Amistad, and seized control of the ship. The voyage to America had stripped the Africans of their dignity and transformed them into a state of powerlessness. On board the Amistad, however, the four men created a bond that was stronger than each singular individual, and through the new society they created, they were empowered to take action and challenge their captors. The rebels risked their lives to stake a claim for freedom, and, in doing so, transformed history.

THINGS TO CONSIDER: THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

As a new student at NYU Steinhardt, you have taken up residence in a community with a unique history. From 1643–1664, Washington Square was home to freed slaves who were given the land as a gift from the Dutch. It is the place of George Washington's 1789 presidential inauguration and Barack Obama's presidential rally; where beatniks, revolutionaries, and drag queens rioted; where folk music was born; and the home of 82-year old NYU alumna Edie Windsor who recently sued the United States Government for marriage equality.

The Amistad Rebellion gives us a working definition of what it means to be free. For the rebels on the Amistad, freedom was achieved through shared values, determination, and collective action. Each of us has a different definition of freedom. How do you define freedom? Is freedom central to your identity, or to the way you understand yourself? Are you part of a community that has its own definition of freedom? Does freedom play a part in the work that you are undertaking at NYU or your goals for the future? Is it intrinsic to your creative work, research, or scholarly pursuits? How do you understand the freedoms that you have when you think about the struggles that men, women, and children face throughout the world at this moment? What does it mean to be free within our global society? What responsibility does each of us have for upholding and ensuring the freedom of all members of our society?

EVENTS & INQUIRY

To gain a deeper understanding of the Amistad Rebellion and its cultural significance, students will visit Hale Woodruff's Amistad murals, and work with their instructors in the New Student Seminar class on a project capturing the theme, "History, Art, and Action." On October 8, 2013, students will attend the Dean's New Student Convocation. Hosted by Steinhardt Dean Mary Brabeck and featuring a guest speaker, the convocation is the final event in our study of Rediker's book.