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Bully Pulpit: Is American Art History Conservative?

Emily Casey

Doctoral Candidate, Art History

University of Delaware

I have noticed a trend in my recent conversations with graduate students whom I meet at American art conferences: “I’m not *really* an Americanist,” they confess sotto voce, with a furtive glance around that suggests they are simply waiting for the disciplinary-field police to discover their deception and frog march them off the premises. From these conversations, I have the impression that my generation of scholars has an image of the ideal Americanist (“expert in nineteenth-century genre painting”), and worry that they just don’t fit the bill. The reasons for their misgivings are various—the modern and contemporary student whose dissertation focuses on a U.S. artist, the architectural historian whose study of the American built environment draws on art historical methods, the European expert who is interested in expatriate American artists, the emerging scholar considering the reception of work by United States-trained artists of an East Asian diaspora, the Latin Americanist writing across the borders of North and South America, the eighteenth-century scholar of the British Atlantic, and the list goes on. Despite researching and presenting in American art settings on topics set in the Americas or pertaining to the lives of Americans, they feel uncertain that the work they do genuinely belongs in the field of American art.

Is American art history conservative? No and yes. As graduate students, our training coincides with a moment when the places, objects, and people of American art history have been radically reevaluated. The reference works that were our introduction to the field—volumes such as *Framing America*, 2003 (Pohl) and *American Encounters*, 2007 (Miller, Wolf, Berlo, and Roberts)—challenge the hierarchies and boundaries of earlier generations. Reinstallations of American art galleries at major institutions in the past ten years have reflected this turn. We have been taught to question the very category of American art. From my position, the work being done today is ambitious and creative, with emerging scholars finding fresh responses to longstanding questions of the field, while identifying new directions and relationships to extend its ground. At the same time, an anxiety seems to follow many of us that rather than innovating the field, we are departing from it. Despite having trained us to expand the definition of American art, our concern is often confirmed by the field itself. We experience it when our efforts at crossing disciplines, geographies, methods, and temporalities are met with discouragement: keep that out of your fellowship application, try presenting that work in a different setting, wait until you have a job.

In pondering the question of the conservatism of American art history, my thoughts have returned again and again to that old question, “What is American about American art?”—a query that begins many undergraduate survey courses and which I received in some form on my comprehensive field exam. The framing questions of

American art imply a field in a constant process of self-invention. To be conservative is to be one that preserves something, to have a tendency to keep things intact and unchanged. The fact that a definition of American art is a question still requiring an answer suggests a field that is not, or not only conservative, but invigoratingly progressive. Or rather, that the conservative tendency of American art history is the inclination to maintain a spirit of inquiry surrounding the basic tenets of the field. This intellectual curiosity has infused the art historical education of this generation of Americanists. The institutions that support the field—professional associations, museums, journals, and fellowship programs—can take greater risks in affirming the plural expressions of American art history being proposed by emerging scholars. Only by being recognized as “real” Americanists, can we make the contributions that will shape the discipline for the future.