



ISSN: 2471-6839

# PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

## *Reflections on Teaching American Art History*

Jules D. Prown

Paul Mellon Professor Emeritus of the History of Art

Yale University

When I began graduate study of art history at Harvard University in 1951, American art resided at the bottom of the art historical hierarchy. Many art historians assumed that the quality of scholars and scholarship in a field could be evaluated by the perceived aesthetic quality of the material being studied, what my late colleague, the historian Peter Gay, called “the aesthetic fallacy.”<sup>1</sup> But production of serious scholarship in American art had been and was being produced outside of the academy in books and major exhibitions with accompanying catalogs by museum curators and directors such as John I. H. Baur, Louisa Dresser, Lloyd Goodrich, and Edgar P. Richardson.

This essay discusses my teaching of American art history at Yale University from 1961 until my retirement in 1999. During that time significant and broad change took place in the field.<sup>2</sup> It offers a personal account of the state of the field when I entered it as it appears to me in retrospect and the influences that shaped the trajectory of my career, followed by a description of activities that led to a focus on teaching and its theoretical, methodological, and practical development.

During my final undergraduate years at Lafayette College I had been uncertain about what to do next. I met with a few professors who knew me well and asked for advice. Having worked summers for a local newspaper and also having been active on the college newspaper, I had thought that I would pursue journalism, but my heart was not in it. I had, however, encountered art history one summer at the University of Wisconsin when a course in “Elements of Radio Broadcasting” that I thought would inform my aspirations toward journalism left me cold and I dropped it. To fill the newly freed time, a friend took me to a lecture in art history, a subject of which I had not heard, that resulted in a moment of epiphany as color-saturated images of Impressionist paintings washed over me. Art had not been part of my upbringing. My family’s limited cultural interests lay in the direction of literature and music. My college professors advised me that since I had discovered that I loved art and liked to live well (I had a yellow convertible and on sunny days would cut class to play golf), I should become an art dealer. “How do you do that?” I asked. “You go to Harvard,” they replied. Still uncertain, I applied to schools of business administration, journalism, and art history. Following acceptances, but a rejection from Yale for art history, I was accepted at Harvard and immediately decided that I wanted to go there with the aim of becoming an art dealer.

First year art history students at Harvard took a required course with Jacob Rosenberg called “Problems of Criticism and Connoisseurship,” discovering how to achieve a dialogue with art objects through systematic close analysis. The overriding purpose of “Connoisseurship” was to teach students how to determine *quality* in works of art, to separate the fine from the pedestrian, the true from the false. From that I learned, among other things, a lesson that I later passed on to my students, namely the importance of

sequence in an investigation. Every observation, conclusion, or speculation colors what follows.

During my first term at Harvard, I also took a course in Italian Trecento art with Benjamin Rowland, an Orientalist with a secondary interest in the Trecento. The first exercise in his course was to compare a drawing of a Renaissance philosopher with a small Japanese scroll image of a sage or monk. One figure was solid, plastic; the other linear, sinuous. Such formal analysis came easily to me and Rowland liked my report. Only now do I realize that this marked an aptitude for visual analysis; I had always assumed that my orientation was toward words. Rowland's effectiveness as a teacher was enhanced by a cowboy and indian approach to subjects under consideration. Given his preference for the stylistic qualities that characterized oriental art, the good guys in the Trecento were the Siennese and the less good guys, but not really bad guys, were the Florentines. It was Simone Martini versus Giotto. Later, as a professor of art history, I resisted the temptation to popularize courses by making distinctions between good and bad because my overriding purpose has been to accept works of art or any artifacts as evidence of the time and place of their making. My project has been to develop and convey a method for unpacking that evidence. But I recognize the importance of conveying values as well as aesthetic standards to students who look to their teachers not only for information but for guidance on more subjective matters, ways of thinking and doing that can be useful to them in their own lives. Certainly that is what I absorbed from my most influential teachers in college and graduate school.

Rowland was laconic in his praise or criticism, allowing a terse comment to work in the mind of a student inclined to receive it. As a result, his few words carried great impact. The highest official grade one could receive was an A, but on my final term paper he also wrote "Compliments." I subsequently learned that this was his way of signaling special approval, and he put it on only one paper, mine, in his courses that term. At the time, given my unimpressive performance in some other classes and the intimidating ability and experience of other students, I was insecure. That signal of encouragement led me to think, "Yes, I *can* do it."

I was also affected by Wilhelm Koehler, like Rosenberg a German refugee scholar immersed in German formalism which, in its emphasis on close reading of works of art, paralleled the New Critical literary techniques that I had embraced as an English major in college, an approach that I found congenial. The following term I took his seminar on "Rubens and Rembrandt." Koehler would often concentrate on a single slide for a full two-hour seminar. His effective close analysis of individual works of art was surely a factor in why in my own teaching I similarly often focused an entire seminar on a single object or image. When it came time to choose a subject for my term paper, I told him of my unfamiliarity with the literature. Instead of advising me to rectify that situation by reading, he told me to write on three states of the Rembrandt engraving "The Three Crosses" in the Print Room with the proviso that I was not to consult a single secondary source. My paper was to be based solely on examination and analysis of the prints themselves. It turned out well, and Koehler summoned me to his office. He had a penchant for drama. Tears filled his eyes, and he said, "Where did you come from?" We chatted a bit, and that was that, but the encouragement conveyed by his positive response, like Rowland's, was very important to me. My personality, however, never inclined me to imitate Koehler by coloring enthusiasm for a student's work with any display of emotion.

After completing one year's course work at Harvard, I traveled in Europe to look at art and then returned to try my hand at being an art dealer. I began working in New York for Norman Hirschl who was in the process of teaming up with Abe Adler to form the firm of Hirschl and Adler. I learned a great deal about what could be determined from careful examination of an original object, the back as well as the front, its materials and structure, frames and stretchers, joints, nails, labels, holes, etc. Over the next two years, I also learned that I was not cut out to be a dealer, but I did discover American art in which the gallery specialized. I wanted to study the subject further. In 1954, no university yet offered a PhD program in the subject with a full-time Americanist on the faculty, but receipt of a fellowship in the recently established two-year program in American Art and Culture at the Winterthur Museum provided an opportunity for me to pursue my new interest and carried with it a master's degree from the University of Delaware.

The Winterthur program was oriented toward the study of the decorative arts. When I told Charles Montgomery, the director, that I was primarily interested in American painting and preferred not to study furniture, silver, and other such material, he told me that the decorative arts were an intrinsic part of the curriculum, as was architecture. I had to study it, and I did so with increasing interest and enthusiasm. One of my teachers at Winterthur was Anthony Garvan, a professor of American civilization at the University of Pennsylvania, who visited once a week. His father had given the Garvan collection of American art to Yale in the 1930s. Garvan himself had studied at Yale where he had been much influenced by George Kubler and by the Human Relations Area File with its statistical approach to the anthropological study of different cultures. This involved taking information from primary and secondary sources about cultural practices—eating, medicine, warfare, courtship, religious practices, dance, etc. This was then coded by category and punched into edge-notched keysort cards that could be retrieved in pre-computer days by inserting needles. Garvan and others at Winterthur believed that one could gain insight into early American history and culture through the application of statistical anthropological techniques to the decorative arts, but they were still experimenting with how to do it. Nevertheless, the concept was there, and the line of inquiry that they were pursuing seemed to me to be valid and promising. In class one day he outlined a process for retrieving comparative information that I convinced him could lead to misleading conclusions. He was favorably impressed by my reasoning and in subsequent years became a major advocate and supporter.

After completing the course at Winterthur (and marrying a classmate, Shirley Ann Martin), I returned to Harvard to finish my PhD. Decorative arts was only taught there as an aspect of early Asian and classical art. American decorative arts was considered even further below the threshold for art historical scrutiny than American painting, sculpture, and architecture. Having already been exposed to American art at Winterthur, I did not enroll in the one course in American art offered every three years by Rowland who, as an artist and an American, was designated to teach it, but I served as his teaching fellow. Rowland subsequently became my dissertation advisor and, although not primarily in the field himself, produced a generation of young Americanists in the years that followed.

Following a year of dissertation research in England surveying the understudied English phase of John Singleton Copley's transatlantic career, I became assistant to John Coolidge, director of Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum. He had established this temporary position to give students who expressed an interest in museums first-hand experience along with time for dissertation writing. I had taken his museum training course earlier and done well in it. I now lived with my family in Newbury, an hour north of Boston,

where I had worked one summer as director of the local historical society, and had stayed on. To facilitate commuting, I began and ended my work day an hour later than usual, which provided an opportunity for me to meet and chat with Coolidge after hours. He relished sharing his thoughts about art, museums, and life as a scholar/teacher/administrator. Most young professionals have a role model, and Coolidge became mine. During my second year in the job, he asked me what I intended to do when the apprenticeship ended. I said that I would like to teach or do museum work, preferably both, in American art. He asked me where the best place for that would be, and I said Yale. It had the largest and best university collection of American art and a long tradition stretching from possession of the first major American painting, John Smibert's *Bermuda Group*, through the first university art gallery and the first university art school, established by John Trumbull in 1832, and John Ferguson Weir in 1864, respectively, to writers and scholars such as John Hill Morgan, John Marshall Phillips and Theodore Sizer. Coolidge told me that Sumner Crosby, chairman of the Yale University History of Art Department at the time and a member of the Fogg's visiting committee, would be coming to a meeting in a couple of months and promised to have a word with him. Fortunately for me, Yale was looking for a junior person in American art, Phillips having died and Sizer retired. Moreover, the curator of the American art collections at the Yale Art Gallery was also going to retire in a few years, suggesting an opportunity in that direction as well. I was well-qualified by my training in both the fine and decorative arts, and Yale hired me as an instructor in the History of Art.

While I had been writing my dissertation at Harvard, Barbara Novak completed hers, also with Rowland as advisor, and began to teach at Barnard College. Her work marked a broader shift in interest from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, accompanied by a comparable shift in academic interest from portraiture to landscape painting, a genre that had been relatively underexplored and undervalued. Almost simultaneously, David Huntington was writing a dissertation on Frederic Church at Yale. Within a few years, a number of young scholars pursued these subjects extensively, and in some cases produced important work using a non-formal approach, the social history of art, that emphasized context. As for the chronological shift in interest, significant scholarly work in the nineteenth century had been done and continued to be done by museum scholars, but their focus was primarily on figurative art. The new academic interest in landscape painting seems to have been triggered not only by scholars but by collectors and art dealers. John Wilmerding, a scholar, museum curator, administrator, and collector, began his distinguished career and particular interests after encountering American seascapes at the Childs and Vose galleries in Boston while still a student at Harvard.

I began as a full-time teacher at Yale in 1961, but spent most of the following year assisting Andrew Ritchie, director of the University Art Gallery, in producing *The Visual Arts in Higher Education* (College Art Association of America, 1966). This study was sponsored by the Ford Foundation to ascertain, through an examination of universities that supported a combination of art history, art museum, and school of art, where and how its philanthropy could most effectively foster development in the field. The History of Art department felt that the experience would be mutually beneficial and encouraged me to participate. Upon completion of that project, I resumed teaching and also became curator of American art at the Gallery. Although nominally each position was half-time, the reality is that if one curates and teaches, one teaches. Student needs come first. Five years later, I was appointed director of the nascent British Art Center at Yale, then named the Paul Mellon Center for British Art and British Studies, and taught only one graduate seminar annually. Finally, at

the age of forty-five, I concluded that I would rather use the museum than run it, and returned to full-time teaching.

This was a major transition, and I had decisions to make. Would I continue along my previous art historical path in which, having completed my dissertation and book on Copley, I had begun to investigate the European academic influence on Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, or move logically on from Copley to Benjamin West, or pick up on my earlier curatorial work that had been leading me toward the application of methods of formal analysis to arrive at cultural understandings, the beginnings of a path toward the nascent field of material culture? I tried my hand at all of them simultaneously. Given my recent experience as founding director of the Center for British Art, I also taught English art at the recently established Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British art in London to add another tool to my teaching kit. From this point forward, although my focus was on academic work, primarily teaching, research, and writing, I also had an increasing amount of administrative work thrown in over the years as a member of and chair of committees, often with the University Library or Yale University Press, acting directorships, departmental positions such as director of graduate studies, chair of the American Studies and the Humanities Programs, and several stints as chair of the History of Art department. Unlike many of my colleagues, I enjoyed committees and administration.

My undergraduate classes consisted of two fifty-minute lectures and one section meeting, usually in the Yale Art Gallery for object analysis that I came to refer to as seminars, in which the class was divided into small groups, one taught by me and others by teaching fellows as necessary. In lecturing, academic or public, I relied on a list of images with a few dates, facts or core ideas appended. I spent several hours immediately before class going through the slide sequence to fix the material in my mind, inserting a word or two in the list to inject a new thought or observation.

I began these undergraduate courses by simply asking the class to focus attention on analysis of a single painting in the Art Gallery collection. Sections then met the following week in front of the picture for discussion. I would ask a student at random, usually to his or her surprise, "How did it make you feel?" I then put the same inquiry to other students. Most were initially stymied by the non-factual question but, when encouraged, came up with a descriptive word or two which, although different, usually had some relationship to the others. Then I would ask what specific elements in the painting gave rise to their emotional responses, regardless of whether these were formal (line, shapes, position, color, value [light to dark]) or iconographic (clothing, facial expression, pose, objects, background, etc.). If they used an abstract term such as "puritan," I would reject it as not being an observable fact. Subsequently, rather than assigning possible subjects from which to choose a topic for a term paper, I asked students to select for themselves a work of art on which to do research and write. I had become secure enough in my familiarity with the literature of the field to know what would be original, fortified by my ability to check things rapidly in my growing personal library.

Graduate seminars met for two hours once a week. When I was a graduate student taking art history seminars, toward the end of the semester students usually presented a summary of the results of their research. I found listening to these oral reports boring. As a professor at Yale, I initially followed the same pattern but again I found student reports uninteresting, invariably about finding or proposing visual or documentary sources, stylistic or iconographic, for artists or specific works. This source hunting, discovering small bits of information related to what was already generally known about American art and artists, did

not demonstrate innovative thinking. I wanted to develop in students the link between eye and brain, seeing and thinking, to hear their own ideas developed from verifiable observations. In order to reduce the authoritarian teacher-student relationship and define the seminar as a joint enterprise in which we explored new avenues of investigation together, I invited students to call me by my first name although they did not need to do so. I would often sit in a central position to facilitate recognizing individuals and direct leading questions to maintain the trajectory of the discussion, but sometimes I would sit elsewhere to break down the sense of hierarchy.

My art history seminars usually looked at early American artists who had an English connection such as Copley, West or Trumbull with admixtures of artists like Charles Willson Peale or Gilbert Stuart and then, increasingly, Winslow Homer and/or Thomas Eakins. Or, with equal frequency, they addressed the burgeoning field of material culture. Shortly after I returned to full-time teaching, Charles Montgomery, whom I had been instrumental in bringing to Yale as my successor in curating and teaching American art, and who had been enormously successful, died. He taught a course called "American Art and Artifacts" billed as material culture that I was asked to take over. Having my own theories about the subject, I revised the course structure but kept the title. After I stepped down as director of the Center for British Art, I had been invited by Maynard Mack of the English Department, who had initiated and directed an experimental Institute for the Humanities at Yale, to accept a part-time position as his assistant as a way of easing my way back into academic life. The Institute invited twenty promising young scholars and one senior scholar from other colleges or universities to spend a year at Yale, taking advantage of its scholarly resources while pursuing their own research projects. As a counterbalance to my art history teaching, I resumed there the investigation of the possibilities of using formal analysis of objects as a method of unpacking cultural meaning that I had begun to explore earlier as a curator in the Art Gallery and discussed in *Ventures*, a Yale graduate school publication. I now developed this further in an article, "Style as Evidence." The senior fellow at the Humanities Institute in its first year, Irving Howe, presented a seminar paper for the fellows entitled "Stones Don't Speak," referencing the mute nature of works of art. I responded with a seminar maintaining that works of art could speak if you used their language, following the procedure that I was developing in my material culture seminar. This was well-received by a number of the younger fellows including Henry Glassie, and I received encouragement and recommendations for relevant reading.

Since art is a category of material culture, albeit a special one, the method of object analysis that I taught was essentially the same in both my art history and material culture seminars. To make my approach more systematic, I spent a summer thinking about the process, which I increasingly recognized as analogous to the scientific method, and to explicate it wrote "Mind in Matter: an Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method."<sup>3</sup>

For graduate seminars my notes were minimal, depending on whether I had a sequence of ideas for discussion based on assigned reading or would focus on object analysis. If ideas, I had an outline with key words underlined; if objects, just a single slide or the object itself in the Art Gallery was the subject matter, relying on my methodological approach as the armature for the discussion. This required adherence to a series of analytical steps that reversed the process I had initially employed leading a) from detailed and statistical description derived solely from the object itself, like a geologist examining a rock, (the fuller and more comprehensive the description, the richer the final conclusion), followed by b) deductions arrived at through interrogation of that information by the analyst,

an interaction of object and mind, to c) the formulation in mind of hypotheses or questions about the symbolic, metaphoric, semiotic or deeper significance of the object as a material formal expression of cultural belief unexpressed or misleadingly expressed by words, and then finally d) engagement in research to arrive at a conclusion validating or invalidating the argument. Since the process required patience and was time consuming, it ran counter to a scholar's instinct to jump to conclusions and get on with it. I told the students that if they did not want to use the step-by-step process in their own work, they were under no obligation to do so, but it was a requirement in the classroom. And I assured them, as they would discover, that it worked.

Much of my teaching was improvisational, picking up on students' comments and allowing that to direct the discussion. I wanted students to overcome inhibitions, feel free to articulate their thoughts, and enjoy their own creativity. Encouraging students to use their creative imagination was a primary goal. In part this happens automatically. As years roll by, students bring to object analysis new ways of thinking that reflect the interests and attitudes of their generation. New students make new discoveries because they have absorbed the beliefs, the understandings, of a changing world, and cannot help but view things differently, and scholarship moves on.

It is often assumed that graduate students know how to write, but the graduate student who is a really good writer is the exception, not the rule. I tried to cushion my criticism of student papers by informing them that I deal with their writing as if it were my own, and I edit them accordingly. It was their responsibility to decide whether or not to accept my suggestions. My emphasis was on clarity of expression. Organization is crucial. If students are not expressing themselves clearly, they are not thinking clearly. They are talking to themselves rather than to the reader. The challenge is to read one's text as if it were someone else's work. I tried to limit my written comments about substantive issues to indications of problem areas, and then I would pursue those issues further in conference. Meetings with graduate students individually became increasingly time consuming as my number of advisees grew. At the end of term I invited the seminar participants and my advisees to an informal picnic or party at my house. Students enjoyed meeting my wife, children, and pets, and seeing where and how I lived. These things built up a sense of community, and to a great extent my students have remained friends with each other and with me over the years.

Over the years it has been gratifying for me in the course of my teaching to see students move from rote performers to imaginative, creative, innovative thinkers. A number of them have ventured creatively beyond where I went in my scholarship, especially by making links to literature that break through the limitation of what is observable in a work, a restriction that I had advocated before they would move on to research that linked the object, art or artifact, to its historical context. Many of my students, whether based in universities (mostly) or colleges, museums, or as independent scholars, have produced substantial work. Perhaps the greatest gratification I have gotten from my career as a curator, museum director, administrator, and teacher is the achievements of my students who have made innovative, sometimes controversial, contributions to scholarship. To this day I continue to learn from them.

For twenty-five years I was involved as a seminar leader and advisor with the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute in which university faculty lead seminars for secondary school teachers, providing content and sharing ideas about our mutual endeavor in a collegial atmosphere. It is desirable, even admirable, for institutions of higher education like

Yale to contribute from their intellectual and other resources toward the improvement of local secondary school teaching. But the benefit does not flow in only one direction. Yale faculty usually find the experience rewarding and return to offer other seminars in multiple years. School teachers come to class after a long day working with sometimes difficult students and limited resources, yet eager to learn. I admired their dedication and realized that it is easy to teach at Yale, having the benefit of brilliant students and extraordinary collections, compared to teaching in New Haven school classrooms. Those seminars made me acutely conscious that I, like them, was a teacher and proud to be one.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This began to change with the arrival of German émigré art historians who took a particular interest in the artistic achievements of their adopted country such as Oskar Hagen in America (*The Birth of the American Tradition in Art* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1940)) and Nikolaus Pevsner in England ("The Englishness of English Art," *The Reith Lectures, BBC* (October and November, 1955)).

<sup>2</sup> Detailed accounts can be found in Wanda Corn "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988); 188–207, and John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (Sept. 2003): 544–80.

<sup>3</sup> "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19, reprinted in Robert Blair St. George ed., *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 1988), pp. 17–37. It also reappears along with "Style as Evidence" and other articles about subjects referred to in this essay in my book *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 69–95.