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Response: Pedagogy Round Table

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Imagine a large Connecticut farmhouse with a yard like a greensward that undulates gently towards the horizon. There is a woodlot off to one side, and pastures—the remains of an older farming community—across the road. The air buzzes with summer sounds: laughter, conversation, a border collie barking, and what seems like an endless supply of children running around as if the world had just been created. To refine the picture further, add several colonial era portraits and landscapes along the interior walls, and a spacious country kitchen with a large central table, the true command post of the house.

I have just described Jules Prown's teaching philosophy. It begins with a spirited embrace of everyday life in all its untidiness, and it includes a sense of history defined by the presentness of the past (and the persistence of both). It also includes a love of technology, an empirical habit of mind, a fondness for bad puns, and a relentless commitment to the powers of the eye. It requires, on the part of Prown's students, an ability to translate what you see into what you say: to talk about images as if they were lifelong friends—sometimes predictable, often surprising, and always rewarding.

Jules Prown was my dissertation advisor. He was also my colleague, my friend, and a co-teacher for two years in a seminar that we jointly taught on American Romanticism and Realism. He was the realist and I was the romanticist, which largely means that he anchored the discussions of Copley, Homer, and Eakins, while I toyed with the likes of Cole and Quidor. Those were a very special two years for me. I learned from him how profoundly Socratic all true teaching is, and how rich and unfathomable images—even the most talked about—can be.

I also learned that he is really a barely reconstructed New Critic. He was an English major in college, and his instinct for close reading, which developed over time into a visually-based procedure that his students fondly call "the Prown Method," owes a great deal to a literary tradition that proclaimed with almost religious fervor that a "poem should not mean but be."¹ The same might be said for his notion of images, only he insists—as a fundament of his pedagogy—that whatever meanings an image holds must be brought into language in order, pragmatically speaking, to make a difference. From Prown I learned that a painting resembles a patient lying on a psychoanalytic couch, not because you attempt, over and over, to analyze it, but because you insist that *it* talk to *you* endlessly in a process that creates or invents meanings as it unfolds.

Here is another way to describe the Prown teaching philosophy. One summer in the 1980s, when I was in my early years as an assistant professor, my wife and I visited Jules in Vermont, where he often worked (and continues to do so today) when he is not ensconced in his office in New Haven. He was writing at the time his field-changing

Winterthur Portfolio essays on material culture, and he was also tinkering, when not writing, with the maple sugaring facilities on his farm. He suggested that we tour the farm by hopping onto—actually, into—the front loader of a tractor that he drove. He then lifted us many feet above the ground, as if we were so many bales of hay, and proceeded to tour us for the next hour through his woodlot and fields. They looked especially magical from our vantage ten feet above the ground. Prown's teaching philosophy resembles that tractor ride: lift them up, open their eyes, ask them to look.

It was a classic performance: playful, sure and instructive. And it echoed with remarkable precision his practice in the classroom. He wears many hats as a teacher, but two in particular stand out: those of tour guide and quester. The former leads to an ever-deepening plunge through the many layers structuring an image, while the latter draws on his deepest pedagogic instincts: interrogating an object by talking about it with students, colleagues, and others around him. And then, when all seems said, talking about it some more.

Scholarship on American art in the 1960s tended to divide into two camps: those eager to claim American exceptionalism for artists of virtually all eras of American history, and those determined to prove the former wrong, largely by tracing the European antecedents for traits otherwise labeled American.² Prown's two-volume Copley book, which grew from his dissertation on English Copley, replaced what in fact was a Cold War battle over American exceptionalism with science and statistics. He used a computer—I believe that he was the first art historian to do so—to “analyze data on 240 of Copley's American sitters, correlating such factors as religion, gender, occupation, place of residence, politics, age, marital status, wealth, size of canvas, date, and medium.” An early paper he presented at the College Art Association describing the project began with a slide of an IBM punch card. The audience “hissed,” as Jules later recounted, albeit with humorous intent. “The chairman of my department at the time advised me to remove the computer analysis section from my book manuscript because its publication would jeopardize my chances for tenure.”

The Copley volumes provided readers with a magisterial overview of Copley as a citizen of the British transatlantic. Prown's vision deftly sidestepped both sides of the American exceptionalism debate by insisting—decades before transnationalism would emerge as a focus of scholarly studies—on the complicated and hybrid relations between English-speaking cultures on either side of the Atlantic. His goal was not to deny characteristics that might be considered uniquely American, but to ground them in a rich—and scientifically supported—account of the ways that local situations nest themselves within larger international currents.

The Copley study had another imperative driving it. The book provided American art history with a genealogy, a “foreground somewhere” that said, in effect, this is where the story begins. It lent the history of American art a clear narrative arc at a moment when the flowering of American art tended to be considered a product of the twentieth century, the triumph of Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. The Copley volumes pushed that conversation back two centuries, planting American art firmly in the soil of the eighteenth century, and in the process, providing students of American art with a new way to imagine their own scholarly narratives. Prown argued that “The

essential character and strength of American art is not the result of independence from the Western artistic heritage: rather it results from the intense, almost greedy, drive on the part of American artists to absorb as much of that heritage as possible while at the same time, with enterprise and ingenuity, transmuted it into artistic statements that are distinctively, if not always consciously, American.”

Those four ultimate words, “if not always consciously,” would grow over time into the engine that would drive Prown's innovative art history. They led to a vision of objects as survivors from the past with a tale to tell. The language for understanding that tale was the language of form. He accommodated the formalism that dominated so much of art historical discourse in the years after World War II by lending it historical heft. The internal elements of a painting or artifact created something more than an abstracted system of colors, forms, and textures. They embodied the voices of the past. “If not always consciously” came to mean the hidden ways that history speaks through the objects that survive it.

When I think back now to the party for Jules' graduate students that day in June, I see one other aspect of his teaching that I might not have appreciated fully at the time. His students form an extended family: they are never merely scholars-in-training or anonymous, squirming bodies surrounding a seminar table. They are part and parcel of his life: interlocutors, friends, fellow travelers. They are not permitted to call him “Mr. Prown” or “Dr. Prown” or even “Professor.” He is always “Jules” to his students, and they know, in pronouncing his name, that they are talking to him from a position of intimacy and trust.

What, then, might we say of Jules' teaching philosophy? Only this: that it is a version of seeing *through* history: “seeing” because it is about the ways that perception, when properly trained, leads us to the hidden life of objects; “through” because nothing is ever what it seems to be at first sight; and “history” because seeing is never innocent: it always drags a portion of the past with it. For Jules, uncovering that past and speaking thoughtfully about it is what true pedagogy is all about.

NOTES

¹ From “Ars Poetica” in *Archibald MacLeish* (New York: Twayne, 1965), 41. The poem was originally published in 1925 with reference to Imagism.

² Portions of my remarks have been adapted from an earlier piece in *CAA News*, November, 2010.