

Special Section: Undergraduate Scholar Articles in Art History

**Undergraduate Scholar Articles in Art History:
An Introduction**

Guest Editors: Jennifer Way, Department of Art History, College of Visual Arts and Design
Lisa Owen, Department of Art History, College of Visual Arts and Design

Guest Discussant: Lauren Hirsch, Department of Art History and Art Education, College of
Visual Arts and Design

This essay began as a response to three art history research papers presented at University Scholars Day 2009 at the University of North Texas in Denton. In my role as the discussant of the session, I pre-read all of the papers to identify common themes and approaches. During the event, I restated and expanded upon the themes to facilitate discussion among the presenters and also between the presenters and members of the audience. What follows is an expanded version of my remarks, along with comments about my own research paper that was received Faculty Senate University Writing Award for Undergraduates for 2009.

In the College of Visual Arts and Design, the undergraduate art history program challenges students to work hard to engage with their subjects of study in the classroom and pursue extracurricular peer and faculty dialogues encouraging new perspectives on the current state of scholarship. Taken together, the variety of topics in the four research papers in this special section demonstrates the dedication that students in our program voluntarily put forth to research areas of personal interest. Furthermore, students continue to display a deep sense of commitment to their study by forming mentor relationships with faculty and by pursuing additional activities, such as field trips and internships. The caliber of research and writing that results exemplifies the commitment that many of my peers demonstrate in our undergraduate program and augurs the talent and dedication we will bring to graduate work in art history and related fields.

One thing this group of papers shares is the reexamination of art historical topics previously considered resolved or deemed unimportant. Also, despite significant differences in the location, time period, and quantity of scholarship previously published on the topic of each paper, all of the papers consider the *other* from a new perspective, whether it be social, sexual, cultural, or political. Furthermore, in regard to this latter commonality, the papers demonstrate a

current tendency in the field of art history, which is to encourage the examination of the historically changing nature of perception. This is essential for analyzing the form and content of objects in their social and cultural contexts.

Charisse Weston's research redresses the depiction of the gendered and racial *other* in Man Ray's photographic series, *Noire et blanche*. In her paper, she analyzes how the use of visual representations of an individual and a cultural artifact galvanized parallels between racial and sexual otherness. Her examination of Man Ray's photography explores the primitive and the female 'other' especially by inquiring how the artist manipulated their visual representations to evoke additional types of otherness. Weston's analysis dispels a more superficial interpretation typically associated with the series and asks us to think more deeply about formalism and formal similarities.

Sarah Sokolow uses primary and secondary documents to develop a method of analyzing the use of quilts as an expression and record of the political and social views of the maker. For Sokolow, this meant rediscovering the story of a woman whose abolitionist views were documented. Her research of abolitionist quilts also raises questions about otherness in gendered contexts. It involves attention to the historical use of quilts as a method of record keeping and a means of political participation, which leads her to disprove assumptions made about the cultural and social status of quilts heretofore valued primarily as examples of craft achievement. Research like Weston's and Sokolow's underscores the need for art history to constantly evolve by using new work in the tendencies and limitations of historical, social, and cultural practices that occurs in non-art fields to re-evaluate existing conclusions in art history. Their work points to our need to enrich art history-specific approaches with the methodologies of other fields as well.

Megan Joyce revisits photography's participation in imperial Britain's colonization of India by exploring inconsistencies in the status of photography as truth and identifying evidence of its cultural and social construction. Moreover, she reveals photography as a multi-dimensional agent of cultural domination and a major factor in the construction of the identity of India. This type of discussion encourages the reader to reconsider a medium historically steeped in discourses of truth in a different light.

In my research, I examine the underrepresented Renaissance artist in Viceregal Spain, a figure that, too often, scholars overlook. I focus on the artist's influences and his role in attempting to help a nation establish its grandeur. I provide evidence for a connection between two works of art that is more complex than correspondences in their figurative content suggest. Interestingly, the later work recreates the style of the more dominant cultural *other* in an attempt to achieve similar goals.

The topics investigated in these undergraduate papers are familiar to researchers in the humanities and social sciences that are concerned with questions of gender and race relations, of social and sexual anxieties, and of self and identity. In our work, my peers and I attempted to study the participation of artifacts in relationship to these questions. As well, we endeavored to be alert to the potential that artifacts have to advance existing scholarly discussions and open up new areas of inquiry for which they would serve as both the subjects of study and as resources facilitating study. We hope our work contributes to art history, continuing to evolve in accounting for why, historically, works of art were meaningful and persuasively propose why they remain so today.