

Special Section: Art History

Introduction to the Art History Section

Guest Discussants: David Thomas and Charisse Weston, Department of Art Education and Art History, College of Visual Arts and Design

For University Scholars Day 2010, the three undergraduate art history majors, Stephanie Santayana, Bevin Butler, and Lauren Hirsch, delivered research papers in a session moderated by two additional majors, Charisse Weston and David Thomas. Although unique in their specific topics, the papers shared an interest in identifying the social and cultural contexts in which art is meaningful and significant. That is to say, despite differences in the time periods, locations, and media of concern to them, the authors of the three papers pose and respond to questions about art in the contexts of historical events and processes.

In part, the variety of methodologies used in the papers reflects that, as nascent researchers and teachers, in order to advance knowledge from our field, it is vital that we understand how to access and review the existing scholarly record. We undertake this process in order to review the record and ascertain its accuracy and fullness. As new methodologies and technologies of research present themselves, opportunities arise for us to advance art history by taking any number of approaches, including returning to the scholarly record to explore its understudied features, redirect some facet of its attention, or establish new lines of inquiry.

Stephanie Santayana and Bevin Butler approach their topics within cross-cultural frameworks. Both review the historiographic record of art history scholarship that has developed for their topic. They then proceed to raise questions that situate their works of art in geographic contexts that invite comparisons across cultural histories. Their

methodology, thus, reframes points of intersection between works of art and their histories in art history within broader contexts that illuminate connections and similarities across diverse cultures and societies. Lauren Hirsch also treats historiography as a necessary point of departure for posing new questions about her topic. However, for Hirsch, revisiting the art history record involves paying attention to its treatment of gender. This allows her to reveal the implications that gender has not only for writing a history of printmaking but also for the very practice of this medium. Hirsch crosses disciplines to show the relevance that research in technology and gender studies has for her topic, which she then applies to the case of a specific printmaker. Each of the three authors treats the art historical record as a representation of works of art that constitutes their meaning and significance. Thus, each endeavors to take a more holistic approach to their topic than has occurred in the past.

All three of our presenters analyzed existing scholarship and then combined multiple ideas or concepts with different methodological approaches to delve deeper into their topics. Their reconstitution of social and cultural contexts within historical frameworks led each to grapple with interdisciplinarity, which characterizes much of art history research. Art history is the study of, not only visual, but also material, culture, inclusive of global geography, history from pre-literate societies to the present day, and the entire spectrum of ethnic, gender and class demographics. In order to engage with relevant features of their research that touch upon these components of art history, art history students, as represented by the session presenters, often learn methods that traditionally are associated with art history as well as methods that originated in other

disciplines and are useful in addressing questions of art history as it interfaces with the humanities and social sciences.

As our three presenters demonstrated, it is also important to take into account cultural variability, as similar forms can differ significantly in meaning, depending on historical social and cultural contexts, as well as with fluidity and change; in other words, an appreciation that even the objects and concepts on which art historians erect studies and, at times, seem to suggest are unchanging, actually undergo change in their physical composition and are transposed by the interpretations that new generations of scholars bring to them. In the session papers, we glimpse this happening in regard to questions of what technology means in printmaking, or the cultural references of images of a bodhisattva, or social and cultural importance of the sound of medieval church bells.