Editors' Notes: Critique of the Canon and Pedagogy in Art History

Virginia Spivey

Renee McGarry

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Editors' Notes: Critique of the Canon and Pedagogy in Art History

We are excited to present this mini-issue of *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* in advance of a special issue of the journal due out later this fall. Our eagerness to share the two studies featured here speaks to their contribution to discourse surrounding the canon's role in art history. At heart, both address the ongoing struggle of art historians to reconcile the legacy of an inherently biased canon that has long been central to instruction in the discipline. By framing the critique of the canon as a problem that is methodological *and* pedagogical, the authors look at how interventions in the ways we teach art history might better confront the social, economic, and ethical dimensions of art historical practice to have a lasting impact on the field.

With this goal in mind, it's not surprising to see focus directed at the key institutions by which the art historical canon is formed, reinforced, and disseminated: the textbook and the museum. For sociologists, Peggy Levitt and Markella Rutherford, their study on art history textbooks emerged from questions about the broad demand for a more global perspective in higher education. In "Beyond the West: Barriers to Globalizing Art History," they posit that while this ideal is popularly accepted, it has not been fully realized in practice and that educators in the U.S. continue to teach a largely Eurocentric curriculum. Because art historians have long been engaged in this conversation, Levitt and Rutherford chose the discipline as a model and examine the response of three major art history textbooks (Janson, Gardner, and Stokstad) to the call for diversified content.

Their study, which pairs empirical inquiry with personal interviews and contextual analysis of conditions in the publishing industry and the education sector, reveals the competing forces that deter radical change in introductory course content. As they point out, these findings about influential textbooks have significant implications for the public's understanding of the discipline and its value:

> *We recognize that in addition to introductory survey courses, art departments also offer courses about particular regions—African art, Asian art, Latin American art, and so on—and would require art history majors to take several different surveys. Nonetheless, the majority of American students taking art history courses are not likely to become majors. The materials included in these introductory texts, therefore, may well be the only exposure non-majors have to works of art and how to interpret them . . .*

Levitt and Rutherford acknowledge the important need for studies that would explore instructional practice and how faculty may (or may not) supplement textbook materials. Certainly, the growing popularity of Open Educational Resources in art history suggests

opportunities for this type of practioner-based research, especially given the increasing amount of public-facing content that exposes and challenges assumptions of a traditional canon.[1]

In "The Canon as Provocation: Partnering with Museums for the Future of Art History," Jennifer Kingsely complements Levitt and Rutherford's work, pushing further to identify the notion of a constructed canon as a threshold concept for art history that should also be addressed. She writes:

> *. . . the power and politics entrenched in the processes of canonization underlie art history's long-standing efforts to diversify its canons. The challenge remains that a more global and inclusive curriculum does not in and of itself enable students to recognize and assess canon formation as a process or to trace and analyze its legacies in disciplinary discourse.*

Through a detailed analysis of two case studies based on recent courses, Kingsley shows the methodological and pedagogical insights students can achieve through robust academic partnerships with museums. She draws on the high impact pedagogical model of community-based learning in working with the Baltimore Museum of Art to provide opportunities for students to critically assess the processes by which canons develop. Rich in scholarly reference and anecdotal reflection, Kingsley's article offers readers information which many will find useful to their own teaching practice. Moreover, her engagement with critical pedagogy and concern with ethical understandings of scholarly practice bring to light to ideas, which have not often been addressed in the literature on SoTL-AH and deserve greater attention.

We thank the authors for their willingness to share these ideas in this forum, and want to acknowledge the interdisciplinary influences that give their studies such depth. They importantly demonstrate the potential of SoTL-AH to have wide-ranging impact in the academy and public-facing scholarship beyond the confines of the discipline. In this project, these articles anticipate our forthcoming special issue of *Art History Pedagogy and Practice*, guest edited by Kelly Donahue-Wallace, that will present seven recent studies in SoTL-AH alongside discussion of the methodological approaches each author employed. We look forward to its publication in the coming months.

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[1] In addition to museum exhibitions and digital art history projects like https://artbma.org/1939/ https://black-artists-in-the-museum.com/ at the Baltimore Museum of Art (discussed by Jennifer Kingsley in this issue), such content is found the popular press, educational websites, and social media. For example, see Titus Kaphar, "Can Art Amend History," filmed April 2017 at TED2017, video 12:35 minutes, https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history/transcript?language=en#t-5934; Sarah E. Bond, "Why We Need to Start sseeing the Classical World in Color," *Hyperallergic,* June 7, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/; Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Expanding the Renaissance: a new Smarthistory initiative," in *Smarthistory*, May 18, 2019, accessed October 27, 2019, https://smarthistory.org/expanding-the-renaissance/; and Smarthistory, "Across cultures, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, September 26, 2018, https://smarthistory.org/across-cultures-an-introduction/

Virginia B. Spivey and Renee McGarry
Co-founding Editors, *Art History Pedagogy and Practice*