

Beyond 'the two art histories'

Charles W. Haxthausen

In 1999 I organised a two-day conference, 'The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University,' held at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The published papers, which appeared in book form in 2002, generated considerable interest, particularly among museum curators, and spawned further discussions of the topic at several conferences. One of these was a half-day symposium held in October 2005 at the Institute of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba, in Japan, to which I was invited to speak, along with art historians from Japan and South Korea. The paper I presented there was published in the conference proceedings, but has found little distribution outside of Japan.¹ Because the topic continues to be relevant, Richard Woodfield kindly proposed that I publish it here so that it might reach a wider readership. —CWH

Before I begin I wish to thank the Institute of Art and Design at the University of Tsukuba for its generous invitation to participate in this symposium on the two art histories. I am flattered and deeply honoured that the book based on the conference 'The Two Art Histories' has awakened interest in Japan.² The conference that was held at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in April 1999 I conceived as a forum to examine relations between the museum art historian and the university art historian in three countries—Britain, Germany, and the United States. I wanted to see whether the tensions between these two branches of the discipline that were so evident in America also existed in other countries. Did university art historians and museum art historians have a different kind of interrelationship in Britain, in Germany? And if they did, was it a result of different national traditions of professional training and institutional funding and governance? We thought it best to focus on no more than three countries, and to have both academics and museum professionals from each of them. We had four authors from Germany, five from the United Kingdom, and seven from the United States. The very fact that this sympo-

¹ 'Beyond "the Two Art Histories"?' in *Museum's Utilization and its Future*, Annual Report of Institute of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba, Japan, 2006, 48-54 (Japanese) and 71-77 (English).

² Charles W. Haxthausen, ed. *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts, Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2002; distributed by Yale University Press.

sium is being held today suggests that this issue is not limited to Europe and North America but extends at least to Japan and South Korea as well. I look forward with anticipation to hearing today's papers and expanding my own perspective on this phenomenon.

In my own paper, I will briefly provide some background on the conference 'The Two Art Histories: The Museum and The University.' I shall then offer some thoughts on possible steps that might lead to more productive mutual cooperation between the museum and the university as well as impediments to such a salutary development.

My interest in this topic has partly autobiographical origins. I have worked in both art histories, and I did so simultaneously. From 1975 to 1983 I had a split appointment as assistant professor, then as associate professor of art history and curator at Harvard University. I was the sole curator in what was then one of Harvard's two art museums, the Busch-Reisinger Museum, which was dedicated to central and northern European art with a concentration in the art of Germany and special strengths in the twentieth century. As a professor I gave lectures and taught seminars in my specialty, while as a curator I organised exhibitions, mostly from the permanent collection, which I frequently used in teaching—this was probably what I loved most about my job, and what I missed most after I left Harvard. But of course making exhibitions was only one part of my job. There were also considerable administrative and fundraising demands that went with it, and these made scholarship difficult. The museum, like all other Harvard museums, was financially self-supporting and had a major shortage of operating funds. An important part of my responsibilities as curator was therefore to find and to cultivate potential supporters in both Germany and the United States.

My conference on the 'Two Art Histories' did not take place until sixteen years after I left Harvard, but it had its origins in experiences that I had during my time there. It was, to be sure, not so much my having two jobs that made me aware of the tensions between university art historians and museum art historians; it was discussions I had as I moved back and forth between the academic culture and the museum culture. My fellow academics viewed and treated me as an academic; most curators assumed I was one of them, that I thought as they did. Some of my academic colleagues at Harvard tended to look down upon graduate students who wanted museum careers—indeed, there was a widely held belief that the less intellectually gifted students were better suited for such a path. The museum was the right place for those who weren't smart enough to be professors! On the other side, curators I met at other museums often spoke contemptuously of the arrogance of academics, who in their view had little interest in and intimate knowledge of the actual physical art objects that they presumed to write on. To this I could add that, after I had spent many hours with collectors and other museum patrons, and solicited donations from corporate executives, I discovered that academics, who often limit their social life and professional lives to their own kind, can be extraordinarily naive about how the

world outside the university works. And partly for that reason, as Ivan Gaskell, a curator at the Harvard University Art Museums, suggests in *The Two Art Histories*, they believe—quite wrongly—that their scholarship inhabits a realm completely detached from the 'corrupting power of commerce' in the larger capitalist art world.³

From my days as a doctoral student in art history my ambition was always to be a professor, and my experience as a curator, though rewarding, did nothing to change that. Working in a museum I also discovered that I had less freedom to determine and pursue my own scholarly agenda. Some issues that interested me might be best realised as exhibitions, but others would not. It is primarily for these reasons that after eight years I chose to leave my position at Harvard, and I have never regretted it. Yet I learned much as a curator that has served me well in my subsequent academic career. In 1993 I became director of the Graduate Program in the History of Art, jointly sponsored by Williams College and the Clark Art Institute, a program with a strong tradition of training future museum curators.⁴ My earlier curatorial experience has been useful in this job. It was partly for the sake of my students, many still unsure of their career path, that I chose to organise 'The Two Art Histories.'

Of decisive importance for my interest in the phenomenon of the two art histories were my travels in Germany, where I have also lived on five separate occasions. I visited Germany several times a year as a young curator, and there I occasionally encountered curators who seemed deeply engaged in the intellectual debates of the day and who used their exhibitions to engage with such issues. Such museum professionals were by no means in the majority, but they did exist.

The outstanding example is Werner Hofmann, who was director of the Kunsthalle Hamburg from 1969 until 1990, during which time he wrote influential books that were often unrelated to his exhibitions, exhibitions which in themselves were often exceptional in their breadth and ambition. While he could write with great sensitivity about the visual qualities of works of art, Hofmann always approached paintings as products of a wider cultural and intellectual history, and he conceived his exhibitions in the same spirit. A stellar example was his large 1983 exhibition at the Kunsthalle, *Luther and the Consequences for Art*.⁵ It attempted to demonstrate the thesis that the protestant reformation in Central Europe, with its devaluation of the cult value of images and its insistence on the primacy of the word, had paved the way for the autonomous artwork of modernity. Hofmann, then, was a museum director who functioned simultaneously as a major art historian; his writings were admired and respected among academics (I invited him to speak at 'The Two Art Histories' conference, but he was unable to attend.). Quite apart from his remarkably rich, erudite mind, a major reason that he was such a prolific and re-

³ Ivan Gaskell, 'Magnanimity and Paranoia in the Big Bad Art World', in Haxthausen, *The Two Art Histories*, 16-19.

⁴ After serving fourteen years in this position, I subsequently resigned in 2007.

⁵ Werner Hofmann, ed. *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst*, exhib. cat., Munich: Prestel, 1983.

spected scholar was that he was able to take frequent and generous leaves of absence in which he could teach and write—a rarity among museum curators and directors. Also, because his museum, like most museums in Germany, was publicly funded he did not have to spend much of his time cultivating donors and patrons to raise money. There are other German directors and curators I could mention but Hofmann is an example of a type of museum professional who has no counterpart in the United States.

Hofmann was not the only one in Germany who conceived such exhibitions as *Luther and the Consequences for Art*. Even to this day, when government funds have become extremely scarce, some German curators still use the art exhibition as a medium for investigating the intersection of art history with political and social history, a type of exhibition that is rarely seen in my country.

One exhibition of this kind was the subject of a contribution to *The Two Art Histories* by the German scholar Eckhart Gillen. He had organised a massive exhibition that opened in Berlin in 1997: *Images of Germany: Art from a Divided Land*. The show reintroduced the question of national identity in surveying German art, both East and West, from the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 to the present. The goal, however, was not to reaffirm the idea of a national art, but to examine the encounter of German art with the aberrations of German history—fascist and communist dictatorship, the Holocaust, political division, and terrorism.⁶

These differences between museum culture in the United States and Germany were a major reason why I thought a conference on the two art histories should have not only representatives of the two branches of the discipline, but also representatives of different national museum and academic cultures. I chose Germany and Britain because of my familiarity with them.

'The Two Art Histories' was the first of a series of annual two-day international conferences organised by the Clark Art Institute. We have now had seven, but none has come close to matching 'The Two Art Histories,' either in the intensity of the discussion or in attendance (we had over 280 people attending). It was telling that there were many more museum professionals attending than academics—clearly the issue was much more urgent for them than for their academic counterparts. Interestingly, all of the papers presented, including those by university scholars, focused on the museum and specifically on the temporary exhibition.

In the remainder of my paper I will look beyond the 1999 conference. I wish to consider some initiatives that could, I think, help bridge the gap between museum art historians and academic art historians. Before doing that, however, let me say that I recognise that there are many academics who work closely with the museum, professors who often find that an exhibition is in some cases an essential component of

⁶ Eckhart Gillen, 'German Art—National Expression or World Language? Two Visual Essays', in Haxthausen, *The Two Art Histories*, 87-101.

their scholarship. For them there is only one art history. But they are a minority, and their practice does not alter the attitudes that are clearly widespread in both camps.

In his contribution to *The Two Art Histories*, Ivan Gaskell writes of the differences between 'museum scholars' and 'university scholars.' 'While the university scholar uses reproductions and descriptions, albeit often in the light of direct experience of the works reproduced, to create interpretations in teaching and publications, the museum scholar uses works of art themselves to create visual discourse—which may be interpretative—in galleries.' 'Given the requisite conditions and qualifications, fine scholarship is produced consistently in both universities and art museums.'⁷

What Gaskell does not address is that within our culture the university scholar is usually able to take leaves of one to two semesters every three to six years to conduct research, as well as having the three-month summer vacation to focus primarily on his or her scholarship, while in most museums the sabbatical remains a rarity. Few curators have the benefit of large segments of time for research and writing, let alone keeping up with scholarship in the field in which they work. Usually this must be done evenings and weekends or on 'vacations', when one is exhausted from the daily routine of museum work. Even if one is fortunate enough to be granted a leave of absence from the museum, it is almost never with salary, so the curator must find outside funding. Because most research grants require full-time work on the project for at least three months, curators are automatically eliminated from the competition since they can rarely leave their home institutions for that long. They simply do not apply because it is unthinkable that their institution would grant them a leave for the requisite minimum period.

It is out of a desire to redress this inequity that two American research programs award research fellowships to curators for periods of as short as a month. The Getty Research Center awards non-residential fellowships of one to three months to curators for 'research for an exhibition or publication, travel to visit sites or collections, revision of a dissertation for publication, an intensive period of reading or writing, or other projects that support professional scholarly development'.⁸ The Clark Art Institute has gone further: it offers residential research fellowships for as short as a month to any scholar, but it has also awarded fellowships of up to a year to curators who were fortunate enough to receive a leave for such an extended period. But there is another element that is as far as I know unique to the Clark, and that is that research fellows from the museum and the university live together in the scholar's residence, frequently dine together, work in adjoining offices, hear papers on each other's research, and, in short, form a community during their time in Williamstown. But even so, such leaves are too short and too infrequent to give curators equal opportunities for thinking, research, reading, and writing.

⁷ Gaskell, 'Magnanimity and Paranoia', 15.

⁸ Regrettably the Getty Research Institute has since discontinued this fellowship category.

The art world event that produces most close encounters between the two art histories is the temporary exhibition. In our system, curators normally organise exhibitions; academic scholars visit them, learn from them, review them, often write for their catalogues, or speak in exhibition-related symposia and lecture series. Yet in the end the curator and the professor usually go their separate ways. Still, I think the exhibition holds out the greatest promise for a more productive interaction of curator and professor. I am not speaking here of academics who often function as 'guest curators', conceiving a show, selecting the works, writing the catalogue, but rather of a genuine collaboration. I see the potential for this in two areas: the exhibition planning and advisory committee and a reconceptualised exhibition catalogue.

I have participated in several pre-exhibition advisory committees during my career. Usually these committees are called together when the conception of the exhibition is already formed. There may be discussions between academic scholars and curators that will influence the catalogue essays, but have little impact on the exhibition itself. Yet one experience I had was different, and I relate it here because I believe it might serve as a model for a more productive kind of collaboration. This was an exhibition organised by the Jewish Museum in New York.⁹ It was not just an art exhibition, but one that sought to tell a story in which art played an important part. The topic was the contribution of Berlin's Jewish population—as collectors, patrons, dealers, critics, poets, and artists—to the emergence of modernism in a city which up to that time had been artistically provincial despite its burgeoning population and its growing economic power.

The process that led to this exhibition began with several telephone conversations that the curator, Emily Bilski, had with me and other scholars. The idea began as a general one—an exhibition about some aspect of Berlin's culture and the contribution that member of Berlin's Jewish population made to it. But beyond that the concept was still quite fluid when the museum called its first of two meetings with an advisory panel, on which I served. There were then two meetings spaced several months apart that involved outside scholars, a cultural historian from the University of Texas, specializing in modern Germany and Austria, and a scholar of modern German literature and culture from Princeton University. In this case, the very concept of the exhibition was developed out of this dialogue between the curator, the director, and scholars with expertise in the field. In these discussions we even addressed issues of installation: the approval of the concept required concrete consideration of how such a narrative—one that involved not only the display of paintings and prints but of extensive documentary material—could be told in a lively and engaging way. All of the university consultants were invited to write for the catalogue, although in the end only one of us was able to do so. This project, which resulted in a

⁹ Emily D. Bilski, ed. *Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture, 1890-1918*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. The exhibition ran at the Jewish Museum from 19 November 1999 to 5 March 2000.

successful exhibition, seems to me an excellent model of a genuine collaboration between the university and the museum.

This kind of partnership between academic and museum scholars could, I believe, also be most fruitfully extended to the production of the catalogue. It is a virtually unquestioned assumption that catalogues must be written before the exhibition and be printed in time for the opening. This means that even the most scholarly catalogue inevitably represents the state of research before the exhibition. After all, the scholarly purpose for the exhibition should be to revise our knowledge of the artist, to stimulate reinterpretations and new directions in scholarship. One of the curators who spoke at our conference characterised a major impressionist exhibition he had mounted as an 'empirical exercise', as 'an experiment whose outcome was by no means certain'.¹⁰ Reports of the results of the experiment, however, rarely appear in a publication directly associated with the exhibition. Rather they are scattered in numerous publications: in reviews, articles, and books. And as such they are usually the product of solitary reflection rather than broadly based collegial debate.

But I still haven't answered the question as to how rethinking the catalogue would help bridge the gap. Let me offer an example. During its summer exhibition of 2001, *Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890*, the Clark Art Institute invited the guest curator, Richard Brettell, a professor of art history at the University of Texas in Dallas, and eight other scholars, one of whom was a museum professional, to a week-long colloquium. Each morning they spent two hours viewing and discussing the exhibition together; in the afternoon they continued their conversation around a table. After four days of this, each participant wrote a paper that grew out of those discussions, and presented it at a public symposium. Unfortunately these papers were not published as a collection. They would have been a fitting supplement to the catalogue, or even a substitute for it. This format, I believe, has great potential for generating a more productive collaboration between the two major branches of the art-historical discipline and fostering a climate of mutual respect that might, one hopes, survive beyond the event. And from their exchanges and presentations a catalogue or collection of essays could be published which is a product of the scholarship generated by the exhibition.

I have proposed three ways for improving the relations between the two branches of art history—giving curators regular sabbaticals for research and writing; promoting the collaboration of academics and curators in conceiving exhibitions; and creating forums for more extended scholarly exchanges and debates during exhibitions, resulting in collaborative publications that document the advancement of knowledge produced by it. Such a program assumes that museums want to advance scholarship, that they still view their contribution to scholarship as fundamental to their mission. Yet, in the United States today there is a growing sense that many do

¹⁰Gary Tinterow, 'The Blockbuster, Art History, and the Public: The Case of *Origins of Impressionism*', in Haxthausen, *The Two Art Histories*, 145.

not. Some museums are increasingly embracing the values and techniques of mass entertainment, moving in a direction that is a threat not only to scholarly values but to the integrity of museum practice itself—and they are doing so without the consent—indeed often in the face of opposition from their curators. The late Kirk Varnedoe, who worked for many years as Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, addressed this issue in a speech he gave before a curators forum in 2002. As he traveled across the country visiting museums, Varnedoe related, he found that every museum curator he met 'was the embodiment of demoralization, resentment, anxiety, stress, and alienation over what was happening in his or her museum'.¹¹

In museums' growing addiction to programs that will attract ever larger audiences and ever greater revenues, many are sacrificing museum ethics and the professional standards of curatorship. One of the most notorious recent examples of this trend is the King Tut exhibition currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In its ambitious quest for huge attendance and copious cash receipts (\$30 a ticket!), the museum accepted an exhibition in which none of its curators—indeed no curator anywhere—was involved. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, *Tutankhamen and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs* was organised by 'Egypt's chief antiquities official, with support in the U(nited) S(tates) from the world's second largest rock-concert promoter and a for-profit exhibition production company'.¹² The chief art critic of *The New York Times* viewed it as one of the most egregious examples of an 'outrageous' trend in the American museum world:

What's remarkable about the Tut show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for which the museum has effectively sold its good name and gallery space to a for-profit company is that people still find this arrangement shocking.

Outrageous? Sure. It's an abdication of responsibility, integrity, standards. But it's becoming the norm.

Money rules. It always has of course. But at cultural institutions today it seems increasingly to corrupt ethics and undermine bedrock goals like preserving collections and upholding the public interest. Curators are no longer making decisions. Rich collectors, shortsighted directors, and outside commercial interests are.¹³

¹¹Amei Wallach, 'Demoralization, Resentment, Anxiety, Stress', *ARTnews*, January 2003 <http://www.artnews.com/issue/january-2003/> [accessed 1 September 2014].

¹²Holly Myers, 'Art Review: A Museum Has Lost Its Muses', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 July 2005, E6.

¹³Michael Kimmelman, 'What Price Love?' *The New York Times*, 17 July 2005.

While writing this paper I received an e-mail from a former graduate student of mine, one of the very best in her class. When she entered the M.A. program in 2000 she exuded a passionate desire to become a curator of contemporary art, and she clearly had the combination of talents to achieve that dream. She had already acquired two years of experience in a prominent New York gallery of contemporary art before she came to Williams College, and after the first of her two years of study she performed so effectively in a summer internship at a major museum that they had a job waiting for her when she finished her M.A. degree. After three years as a curatorial associate with major responsibility, she wrote to say that she was now planning to return to school to pursue a doctoral degree. Her e-mail also contained a startling admission: she was reconsidering her commitment to museum work; she was now thinking about an academic career. The reasons she gave, I am sad to say, corroborate the trend I have just described. I quote from her e-mail:

I find that the museum is not currently supportive of serious scholarship and intellectual engagement; rather, it's being run by the Marketing and Public Relations department and, as such, big, one-name shows are the only projects that are approved. Collection-building is about satisfying trustees' appetites more than anything else. Perhaps what has been most dismaying is the lack of critical perspective or distance in everything we do. I am constantly called upon to 'sell' an artist or object to someone, which is not the kind of art historian I had envisioned that I would become. We constantly try to fight this machine, but I'm getting nowhere despite my initial belief in the ability to effect change, and it has become exhausting.

I don't wish to end on such a negative note. There are, I am happy to say, museums that seem still largely unaffected by the depressing trend I have described, museums that support ambitious research and scholarly exhibitions by their curators. University art museums and many small private museums fall into this category. In my job I am happily closely involved with both kinds of institution, for we have two museums in our small village of 8,000 people—the Williams College Museum of Art and the Clark Art Institute, which was founded by the art collectors Robert Sterling and Francine Clark in 1955. Both museums usually offer free admission to the public, and are not concerned with compromising the quality of their exhibitions to attract the largest possible audience. In the Williams graduate program, curators of both museums are given the opportunity to teach advanced art history students, which gives them a weekly forum for developing and discussing their ideas, and they regularly mount unusual and scholarly exhibitions rarely seen in larger urban museums.

I will conclude by showing two current exhibitions that are products of this supportive institutional environment. *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film 1880-1910*, now on view at the Williams College Museum of Art, examines the in-

terrelationship between old visual media—painting and printmaking—and the then new medium of film. This is a subject that had never before been examined in such depth and the exhibition was the ideal medium for such an investigation. The curator Nancy Mowll Mathews, a widely published scholar of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century French and American art, worked on this exhibition for ten years, and the museum was willing to support the long preparatory work in an exhibition that will be seen by the public free of any admission charge. Now that it is on view, she is teaching a graduate seminar on the theme of the exhibition.

A second exhibition, on view at the Clark Art Institute, is devoted to the museum's collection of over 200 works by one of the most important late nineteenth-century American painters, Winslow Homer. It was curated by my colleague, Marc Simpson, who was formerly a curator in San Francisco and now teaches with me in the Williams graduate program, while serving as a part-time curator at the Clark Art Institute. In conceiving the exhibition, he was strongly influenced by his experience of working with advanced students and advising their research on a wide range of topics, including contemporary art. Instead of presenting a conventional retrospective of the artist's career, Mr. Simpson wanted to use the installation to create multiple simultaneous narratives—narratives of Homer's stylistic development, of his dual career as a painter and illustrator, of his subject matter and its connection with a web of contemporary social and cultural issues, of his relationship to the art market, and even the subsequent formation of the collection in the 1920s by Mr. Clark, the founder of the museum. The exhibition features a highly unusual wall in which Homer's prints are hung according to theme in intersecting horizontal and vertical sequences like a crossword, so as to be part of intersecting narratives. The very installation of the pictures demonstrates how the spatial medium of the exhibition is much better suited than a book to present these multiple narratives, to provide alternate ways of viewing the same work. The title of the exhibition is: *Winslow Homer: Making Art, Making History*. It is Homer who made the art, but it is ultimately we, the academic and museum scholars who make the history when we construct historical narratives around these objects. The installation of the exhibition manifests that act of construction more vividly, more provocatively than any publication could. And in this regard its subject is not just the artist Winslow Homer but the writing of art history itself.

We hope that exhibitions like these will inspire our students and persuade them that museums still offer opportunities for ambitious and innovative scholarship, that they can be both scholars and curators. The health of the discipline of art history depends on that continuing possibility.

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Kritische Berichte 48, no. 1 (April 2014). He has published widely on modern and contemporary German art and early twentieth-century German art criticism.

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