

SELF, OTHERS, EVENTS

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My surprise at learning that I had an “intellectual trajectory” of possible interest to others resembled that of Moliere’s M. Jourdain on learning that he had been speaking prose for forty years without being aware of it. Although concerned with matters of the mind, I have never considered myself an “intellectual,” engaged with complex theories or matters of worldwide importance. “Trajectory” does not seem to fit either, since it implies a smooth arc. My trajectory, especially in its early years, resembled a pinball more than a cannon ball. As it has been for others in this series, my progress reflected serendipity more than intention. But here, in brief, is the story.

I grew up in Freehold, New Jersey, a small rural town between Princeton and the Jersey Shore. Now overrun by development housing, the area was then still quite agricultural. An early photograph shows me with a haystack in the field behind our house. I came from a second generation, middle class, non-observant Jewish family and, having a much older half-brother and half-sister, was effectively raised as an only child. My father was a successful small business owner during the Depression. My strong-willed and ambitious mother put me into school a year early, and when I skipped the third grade I became two years younger than my classmates, a cause for later unhappiness. She read popular books, listened to opera, and propelled what culture existed in our house. We had little art (some Currier and Ives prints, images of George and Martha Washington on one wall and Abraham Lincoln on another, some flower pictures), and never went to art museums. In the sixth grade I began commuting as a day student to the Peddie School in nearby Hightstown. When the war caused gasoline rationing, I became a boarding student, content with the schoolwork but, being younger than my classmates, rather out of things socially. Since I could not compete effectively in sports, my way of not being viewed as nerdy was simply not to do well academically. More interested in comic books and forbidden cigarettes, I received mediocre grades.

After I fell ill in the wake of a botched appendix operation during the summer following my junior year, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to return in September for the start of school. I recovered quickly, but in order for me to be re-admitted, the headmaster decreed that since I would be too young (meaning immature) to go on to college the following year, I would have to repeat the junior year, taking courses that I had avoided such as biology, physics, and advanced algebra. This did not make me more adept in science or math, but I did become more involved with classmates as friends, engaged in sports, and had enjoyable junior and senior years.

My first choice for college, Dartmouth, where my brother had gone, rejected me. I felt that my second choice, Swarthmore, was the right place for me, but I was re-

jected there too. I had a cousin who had gone to Lafayette, so when I went to see the headmaster about getting in someplace, he called up the head of admissions there and told him that he had a bright Jewish student (such a qualifying description was normal in those days) who wanted to apply. I was accepted.

I had a splendid time at Lafayette, active in fraternity life and student government, and was sports editor of the college newspaper. Inclined toward journalism as a career, I worked for our local town newspaper during the summer (we had by then moved to Red Bank, New Jersey). Between my sophomore and junior years I went to summer school at the University of Wisconsin, a delightful place to be with 5,000 women and 2,000 men on the shores of Lake Mendota. An English major drilled in the methods of close reading inherent in the New Criticism, I took a course on "American Prosody" that I thought would be (and was) interesting, and one in "Logic" (my minor was Philosophy) that was not offered at Lafayette. I also enrolled in a course called "Elements of Radio Broadcasting," thinking that it would enhance my journalistic ambitions. We were asked early on to create and present a program. When I got into the glass booth to speak, with no human listener present, I froze. It was a terrible experience. I immediately dropped the course, opening a slot in my schedule. A friend invited me to accompany him to an art history class. I had never heard of art history, but went to hear James Watrous lecture on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. We sat in the front row and suddenly unfamiliar images, saturated with color, washed over me. I had an epiphany. When I returned to Lafayette I found only a single-term course offered in art history, taught by the Latin professor, Johannes Gaertner. A short, dapper German refugee, Gaertner had strong opinions on all things cultural, and a flair for the dramatic. I remember walking into class one day where, instead of writing on the blackboard as usual, he sat at a table in the front of the room with a stack of books before him, an open penknife beside it, a white handkerchief draped over the top of his head, and a cherubic smile fixed on his face. Very strange. When everyone was seated, he swept his arm across the table, knocking off all of the books, and threw the penknife into the floor where it quivered next to the books. "Gentlemen," he announced, "this is Dada." Corny, but not easily forgotten.

Still undecided in my senior year about what I wanted to do after college, I had coffee one afternoon with several professors and asked for advice. One said, "Well, look, you have discovered that you love art, and you like to live well (at that time I had a yellow Plymouth convertible and was known to skip seminar on a nice day to play golf), you ought to be an art dealer." "That sounds good" I said, "How do you do that?" "Go to Harvard," was the reply. Not entirely persuaded, I applied to several places: Columbia for American Literature, having written my senior essay on T. S. Eliot; the Wharton School at Penn and the Harvard Business School to cover my "living well" aspirations, and to Yale and Harvard for art history. I was accepted at Columbia and the Wharton School, wait-listed at the Harvard Business School, and rejected by Yale, but when, somewhat to my surprise, I was accepted at Harvard it became im-

mediately clear to me that art history was the direction I wanted to pursue. I visited Cambridge during the summer to get a sense of the place. The Chair, that summer, of what was then called the Department of Fine Arts was George Hanfmann, a classical archeologist with a thick German accent. We chatted, and at one point he said, "You know what I am doing this summer?" "No sir," I replied. "I am learning (he mentioned some obscure Near Eastern language) and do you know how I am doing it?" When I replied that I did not, he pointed to a row of books behind him and he said, "I am reading these." I was duly impressed. Then, as I was leaving, he remarked, "I hope that you have a good time when you come here." "I am not coming here to have a good time," I replied. "I meant a good time in the higher sense," he shot back. Chagrined, I left.

First year students in Fine Arts at Harvard took a required course with Jacob Rosenberg called "Problems in Criticism and Connoisseurship." From Rosenberg I learned the importance of achieving a dialogue with the object under study through systematic analysis, a process which later became integral to my own research and teaching. I also was particularly influenced by Wilhelm Koehler, another German refugee scholar. Both Rosenberg and Koehler were deeply versed in German formalism, which in its emphasis on close reading of works of art paralleled the New Critical literary techniques with which I was familiar and that I found congenial. When the time came to choose a term paper topic in Koehler's course, "Rubens and Rembrandt," I confessed to him my lack of background and general ignorance of the subject. He suggested that I work on three states of Rembrandt's etching *The Three Crosses* in the print room with one condition. I was not to read a single book or article, but write the paper solely on the basis of examination of the prints themselves. It was a wonderful, formative experience. Koehler's method was to analyze individual objects closely and at length. Sometimes he would give a seminar with just one slide, bringing in one or two other images briefly as needed for comparisons, a practice I inherited. Like Gaertner, he could be quite dramatic. Once he was speaking in front of the class, building his argument, and when he reached a crescendo, walked across in front of the screen, out the door without concluding, and did not return. At the end of term when I went to his office to get my paper back, he seemed emotional, almost teary, asked where I had come from, and placed a large "A" on top of the first page. That, plus encouragement from Benjamin Rowland, an Orientalist from whom I took courses on Chinese painting and Italian Trecento painting, his secondary interest, led me to believe that I could pursue art history successfully.

At the end of the school year I went to Europe to look at art, and then returned to try my hand at being an art dealer. I began by working for Norman Hirschl who was in the process of teaming up with Abe Adler to form the firm of Hirschl and Adler. In the course of two years I learned that I was not cut out to be a dealer. Once a couple of promising young collectors came in and I showed them a painting by George Inness. I told them that it was very fine but, not having the good sense to stop, added

that it was not as good as one that we had sold two weeks earlier. They were out the door. On the other hand, while working as a dealer I learned quite a bit about the trade and about the evidentiary importance of the materials of works of art – frames, stretchers, keys, nails, etc. – both of which served me well in later years as curator and director. And I discovered American art, a non-existent subject at Harvard except for one course given by Rowland every third year.

A fellowship in the recently established two-year program in American Art and Culture at the Winterthur Museum, that carried with it a Master's Degree from the University of Delaware, provided an opportunity for me to pursue that new academic interest. Since the program was strongly oriented toward the study of the decorative arts, I called the Director, Charles Montgomery, and told him that I was primarily interested in American painting and preferred not to study furniture, silver, and other such material. He informed me that to participate in the program, I had to study the decorative arts and architecture as well as painting. So I did, with positive consequences for my subsequent career. One of my teachers at Winterthur was Anthony Garvan, a professor of American Civilization at Penn (whose father had given the Garvan collection of American art to Yale in the 1930s) who came to Delaware to teach one day a week. He had been much influenced by George Kubler and also by the Human Relations Area File at Yale with its statistical approach to the anthropological study of different cultures. Garvan and others at Winterthur felt that one could gain further understanding of early American history and culture through the application of those techniques to the decorative arts, but they were still experimenting with how to do it. Nevertheless the concept was there, and the line of inquiry that they were pursuing seemed to me to be valid and important.

After my two years at Winterthur, I returned to Harvard to finish my Ph.D. Being interested in the possibility of going into museum work, I took the museum training course then taught by John Coolidge, Director of the Fogg Art Museum. The following year I accepted a summer job in Newburyport, Massachusetts, as Director of the Historical Society. I had married a Winterthur classmate, Shirley Ann Martin, and we settled happily into a house on the Newbury marshes owned by Elliott Perkins, a Harvard history professor and Master of Lowell House, where we lived for the duration of my time at Harvard. "Perk" exerted a significant influence on me, not in terms of my intellectual trajectory, but rather in learning about chain saws and tractors and the attractions of country living, which became a lifelong diversion. At Harvard I also served as a teaching fellow for Rowland's American art course, during which I took students to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts where, in addition to paintings, I talked about furniture and silver, objects that the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard seemed not to consider a legitimate part of art history.

The following summer I directed the Old Gaol Museum and Historical Society in York, Maine. Then I spent a year in England working on my dissertation which surveyed the English career of the eighteenth-century American artist, John Single-

ton Copley. Following my return, I worked for Coolidge as Assistant to the Director in a program he had initiated for a student possibly interested in a museum career. Coolidge relished sharing his thoughts about art, museums, and life as a scholar/teacher/administrator. He had the disconcerting habit of responding to a question by staring at you intently for what seemed a long time before he answered. He was thinking. Most of us as young professionals have a role model at that stage of life, and Coolidge became mine. When I started my second year in the job, he asked me what I intended to do when the apprenticeship ended. I said that I would like either to teach or do museum work, preferably both, in American art. He asked me where the best place for that would be, and I said Yale. He told me that Sumner Crosby, Chairman of the History of Art Department at Yale, was on the Fogg's visiting committee, would be coming for a meeting in a couple of months, and that he would have a word with him. It turned out that Yale was looking for a junior person in American art, and the curator of the American art (Garvan) collection at the Yale University Art Gallery was going to retire in a few years. Yale hired me as an Instructor in History of Art and American Studies.

In my second year, I was invited by Andrew Ritchie, Director of the Yale Art Gallery, to work as his assistant on a College Art Association sponsored Study of Higher Education in the Visual Arts in the United States. We traveled around the country visiting universities that had a combination of history of art department, art gallery, and school of art. With the completion of that project I became Curator of American Art in the Art Gallery in addition to teaching American art. It was a captain's paradise. I had a great collection of American art at my disposal with which to work curatorially and for teaching as well.

My dissertation on English Copley had been recommended to Harvard University Press for publication. But since Copley enjoyed a better-known twenty-one year career in America before he went to England, the Press indicated that it wanted a two-volume work covering his entire life. To produce the companion book, I undertook an investigation of Copley in America that focused on his sitters as well as the artist's biography and works. With a great deal of factual information available about the individuals who sat for Copley for portraits, thanks to the intense genealogical interest of some New Englanders in their colonial ancestors, I investigated 240 portraits of firmly-identified Copley sitters. This produced a statistical study in terms of their religion, occupation, place of residence, marital status, politics, and degree of wealth. It was correlated on a computer, then a new technology, with information about the portrait itself – medium, size, date, etc.

The field of art history, conservative when confronted with anything new, had problems accepting American art as art, and found it even more difficult to consider the decorative arts as significant. The innovative and unorthodox use of a computer for an art historical study seemed threatening. The chairman of my department advised me to remove the computer section from the book since its publication might

jeopardize my chances for tenure. After the manuscript was accepted, I presented a paper on the potential for using a computer in art history at the annual meeting of the College Art Association. I began by showing an IBM punch card on the screen; the audience booed, good-humoredly masking discomfort with the new technology.

My next scholarly project, aside from a general book on American painting largely drawn from my undergraduate lectures, shifted focus from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, specifically on the way in which Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins had been influenced by European academic art. I traveled through Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Holland, Denmark and England looking at that material. On the curatorial side, I was especially interested in the potential of the decorative arts as an aid to understand the belief systems of earlier cultures, an intellectual move away from the social history embedded in the Copley study toward cultural history. I wrote an article for *Ventures*, a magazine produced by the Yale Graduate School, about the evidentiary potential of this kind of material, anticipatory of my later work in material culture. An unforeseen development derailed both undertakings.

In late 1966 Kingman Brewster, President of Yale, announced Paul Mellon's intended gift to the University of his collection of British art, along with funds to build and staff a center to house and utilize it. A committee was formed, chaired by Louis Martz of the English Department, to draw up a program for the proposed center. Andrew Ritchie and I constituted a sub-committee to specify what kind of a building should be created to accommodate the collection and the accompanying staff and programs. After the committee report was accepted, Brewster invited me to become the first Director. When he asked me to recommend someone to succeed me in curating and teaching American art, especially decorative arts, I suggested Charles Montgomery who had stepped down as Director at Winterthur. Montgomery eventually accepted, and enjoyed great success both as a curator and teacher at Yale.

The late sixties were a time of social unrest in New Haven and at Yale. Establishment of a center devoted to British Art, a subject little known and relatively unappreciated at the time, was not widely viewed as a high priority. Brewster wanted to indicate to the academic community that the center did not reflect an esoteric interest of a wealthy alumnus imposed on the University, but would be integral to its academic mission. He signaled that intention by naming a member of the faculty as Director. My first responsibility was to recommend an architect, and, after considerable investigation, I suggested Louis Kahn who had designed the Yale Art Gallery (1953) and was well known as a visiting teacher in the School of Architecture. These factors, however, were not primary. The preliminary program I developed for the center called for the use of natural light, screened to eliminate damaging ultraviolet radiation, to illuminate paintings. Another desire was the creation of domestic rather than open loft spaces for the exhibition of works of art. In his architecture Kahn had demonstrated mastery of the use of light, especially daylight, and was committed to the importance of room-like spaces.

During the ensuing years I worked with Mellon, Kahn, and faculty and student groups to develop plans for the building and the institution that would occupy it. When the building neared completion, I realized that I would rather teach and use it than serve as the Director. Sometime earlier, the International Society for Eighteenth Century Studies had approached me about holding its quadrennial meeting at Yale. The British Art Center was coming along and Yale seemed a logical place. I spoke with Georges May, then Dean of Yale College, about the possibility. In the course of the discussion he mentioned as an aside that from his experience, seven years appeared to be the maximum time to permit smooth re-entry from administration back into academic life, the pace being so different. Nearing that time limit himself, and being a respected scholar of eighteenth-century French history, he expressed interest in becoming General Secretary of the proposed meeting as a way of making his own transition back into academe (which he did). May's theory about the timing and difficulty of re-entry made sense to me; I stepped down as Director and returned to full time teaching.

The question then was where to pick up the threads of my scholarship, what direction should I pursue? I could go back to American art, specifically by working on Benjamin West whose artistic career paralleled Copley's. I could also resume my interest in Homer and Eakins, and in subsequent years I did write on West, Eakins, and Homer. As Director of the British Art Center, I had absorbed considerable knowledge about British Art beyond what I had learned from my study of Copley's English years. Consequently I taught one summer in the newly established Yale-in-London program, which gave me a wonderful opportunity to learn more through working with original works of art in and outside of London and add another area to my teaching of art history at Yale.

I also picked up where I had left off in my thinking about the decorative arts and the emerging subject of material culture. At that time Maynard Mack of the English Department received a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to start a Yale Humanities Institute to run for three years, and he asked me to be Associate Director. At the Institute, twenty bright young scholars from around the country came as fellows for a year, along with one senior person. Many of the young scholars, a number of whom were fairly radical in their thinking, were interested in such things as structuralism, semiotics, and Marxism, theoretical approaches with which I had little or no familiarity. At one point I presented to them my thoughts about the evidentiary potential of objects, anticipating that some of them would criticize what I was doing because the high culture objects with which I then worked (furniture, silver, etc.) were "elitist". But the fellows observed that I was employing some of those newer theoretical approaches, even if unknowingly. They encouraged me to pursue my efforts and provided helpful suggestions for reading, in particular theoretical writings related to my work (especially its links to cultural anthropology).

In dealing with both “fine” and “decorative” art objects in my work and in my teaching, I applied the formalist methods that I had learned at Harvard to the cultural history goals that I had absorbed at Winterthur, convinced that the formal analysis of things could provide affective access to the producing culture, to the belief systems of other times and other places. My approach soon crystallized into a particular methodology for the study of material culture about which I wrote (and which some of its more zealous devotees now refer to as “Prownian analysis”). The essence of this approach to the study of artifacts, including art, is to analyze all objects as if they were works of art. (Conceptually this was articulated much earlier by the Czech scholar Jan Mukarovsky, although I was unaware of it at the time). The method prescribes specific steps in a larger sequence of description, deduction, and speculation that lead subsequently to the investigation of outside sources in order to validate and enlarge upon ideas generated by the object analysis. You do not really see something until you focus on it, to say you see it, even if only to yourself. There is nothing arcane about the process, which is analogous to the scientific method, but much depends upon the discipline, sensitivity and, ultimately, creativity of the analyst, as well as rigorous adherence to sequence since any observation or conclusion will color whatever follows. Innocence is difficult to recover. The purpose of the method is to let the object speak of its culture, to prevent the premature imposition of biases derived from the analyst’s own culture, although these can and should eventually provide innovatory insights.

Over the next twenty-five years of teaching after leaving the British Art Center, I routinely asked students to use this approach both to artifacts in their study of material culture and to works of art in their study of art history. I do not distinguish much between the two unless addressing esthetic issues. I have spent much of my later career trying to convince colleagues, students, and readers of the intellectual potential and importance of objects – palpable things – for providing insights into culture not available through verbal or numeric analysis. In retrospect, it occurs to me that there may have been a literary substructure to my teaching of which I was unaware, perhaps also manifest, as my students will attest, in my compulsive attention to writing: my conviction that if you are not writing clearly you are not thinking clearly. It can perhaps be traced to my background as an English major and expressed in articles such as the one entitled “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?” in which I argued that artifacts can be more deeply interpreted if read as fictions rather than as historical facts. (See Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2001, pp. 220-234.)) What is at play is the interaction between image and word. Some of my students both from Art History and American Studies have pushed further in this direction of imaginative ekphrastic analysis, while some have gone beyond me in other directions. The sum of their accomplishments, to my gratification, is where my “intellectual trajectory” has landed and continues.