

## Doing Historical Research

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Students preparing to become art teachers at Massachusetts College of Art enroll in a course that teaches them the techniques of historical research. Students' learning is organized around questions of their own choosing; their search for answers leads them to find physical evidence, real objects they may touch and examine closely. One student found part of a Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk, the researching of which opened up a multitude of possible directions for historical investigation. No longer should teachers consider historical research a dry pursuit; history explains where we are and is grounded in everyday life.

Many people think of researchers as oracles and think of history only as dead numbers or dates they had to learn back in high school survey courses. The combination of these two prejudices makes it unlikely that art teachers can see themselves as historical researchers. Since both research skills and historical knowledge have direct relevance to professional practice, something should be done to transform past prejudices into new powers and skills. One method shall be described here in which teachers are trained to do historical research.

Massachusetts College of Art, originally Massachusetts Normal Art School, was the first institution in America founded to train art teachers, back in 1873. History is so much a part of our institution that all students preparing to become art teachers, and some who are not, enroll in a course entitled *History of Goals and Methods of Art Education*. Their work in this course helps them understand the place where they are and the biases and vocabulary that have been handed down through the generations at the college. Because Massachusetts Normal Art School established a model that was discussed, debated, and generally emulated across the nation, students learn about developments in art education through their curiosity about our own college. Fortunately much of the original library still remains, so students may happen on treasures in their meanderings through the stacks. History is very present.

In the beginning of their work in this course, students need help in finding out what

they already know. To do this, they chart a branching time diagram or mind map of all the people and event landmarks in art education of which they can think. They choose the limits, starting with whatever first came to their minds: medieval guilds, Victor Lowenfeld, folk artists, Bauhaus, or cave painters. It is amusing and significant to each of them that they choose different starting points and that each defines the field quite differently from the start. Students' charts reveal what they know, imagine, and think ought to have existed. They feel nervous about all the empty spaces but slowly accept that their charts are expected to be incomplete. The remaining holes can be as educationally informative as the known events because both named landmarks and empty spaces can become targets of possible research efforts. It is as productive to say "I don't know anything about art education in the thirties. What took place along with the W.P.A.?" as it is to mark a landmark such as "Rudolf Arnheim published the first edition of *Art and Visual Perception* in 1954." Once the charts are done, students exchange ideas with one another about who left out what and how to find out more about what might fill in those empty spots.

One empty hole or another draws the interest of each student. Following their discussion with one another, students are asked to form questions about a facet of the history of art education about which they would like to know more. Despite all advice to keep the questions focused and manageable, at this stage the questions tend to become broad, for example, "What is the relationship between trends in art education and economic patterns?" As their teacher, my

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work is to enable them to take their unmanageable, ambitious questions and transform them into modest, smaller problems about which they can seek concrete information.

### Seeking Evidence

My method of teaching history contains two features that are critical to the transformation of students' past prejudices against historical research. The features are that their historical learning be organized around questions of the students' own choice and that the students find physical evidence enabling them to investigate and perhaps answer their own question.

The selection of a riveting question gives energy to the search for physical evidence. That choice of question is critical. In a recent interview Rudolf Arnheim said, "Most people have the generative ideas of their lives in their early twenties. As far as I can tell, what happens to most of us is that at about that age one gets hooked by a particular task or idea, and then one spends the rest of one's life elaborating on it" (Pariser, 1984, p. 178). At this time people often enter the profession of teaching, and whether or not they are conscious of their questions they are likely on some level to be working on it.

Teachers who undertake the study of historical research have all to gain by identifying the question that drew them to art teaching in the first place. If they can trust their own curiosity, they will center on their original fascination. They will see how much they have already thought about those questions and will identify everything else they subsequently hear throughout the course as belonging or not belonging to them and their questions. I encourage them to have feelings of intellectual ownership. Everything they learn about their questions becomes the foundation upon which they can build a new understanding of the field.

Fascinating as is that process, here I choose to concentrate on the other search, that is, for evidence that may inform and provide clues concerning their questions. Students are encouraged to ferret about for physical evidence of the time and people who interest them. This evidence provokes new ideas and enables them to think further and more deeply about their questions. By physical evidence, I specifically refer to things that students may touch, hold, turn over, and examine closely. Their search may start with books in libraries but inevitably leads them on to scour such unlikely sources

as yard sales and flea markets. From the physical objects they find, they can learn something they otherwise would never know.

### What is Evidence?

When I first studied history in college, I learned to consider two kinds of sources. *Primary sources* were those documents written in the words of the figure under study or those related to that figure in time, culture, field, and so forth. An inferior, less reliable, and inevitably distorted second kind were called *secondary sources*, including reports of other, later times and places by people who interpreted and reflected upon a certain figure or group or movement or whatever. My memory of what my teachers taught may be distorted, but I saw secondary sources as interpretations that were less useful than primary sources in the investigation of what was true. Perhaps this dichotomy was useful in helping me distinguish first-person from third-person writing and enabled me to recognize historical selectivity in any reporting, but gradually I began to see every item as a primary source, a slice of data on the time and place and those responsible for its existence. No book carried more weight or authority than any other, and perhaps above all, books became suspect when they strove to claim a comprehensive picture of what was.

In my own development of research skills, I went through a stage of rejecting books entirely. It seemed too likely that critical information that had been omitted way back was continually omitted, resulting in an explanatory construct being passed along to me that would obscure possibly essential bits of information. In my research of the history of art education, I wanted to see the materials that 19th century art students used, the objects artists collected and treasured in the course of their youth and schooling, anything that supported them to the pursuit of drawing, painting, sculpting, cartooning, or whatever. I became and remain convinced that in order to see a lot of stuff, you can't look to books. It's as simple as that. Books aim to simplify and generalize, and seeing is unique, individual, and particular. I concluded that the most important features of the history of art education were likely never to have been, and by definition were never to be, condensed into books. Logan's *Growth of Art in American Schools*, a marvelous slice of the world view in 1955, taught me about the necessity of looking. Logan charted the vast field filled

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with open spaces that begged for researchers'  
attention.

### Guiding Students Toward Evidence

My fascination with obscure and unknown objects as clues about how people thought about art and talked about art in America inevitably permeated my teaching and influenced the directions I offered as possibilities for students. Once a student had her personal research question, I would ask, "How could you find out?" She might start by naming books and journals. I would ask, "How else might you find out?" "I could go interview my grandmother who went to the Art Students League . . ." This idea might remind the student that her grandmother had a lot of her old art school drawings up in her attic and that her library held those old-fashioned art history books that were the finest attainable in those days. Those pale and pathetic objects suddenly jumped into the foreground as treasures and opportunities for research. Background objects of ordinary life that had become almost invisible suddenly became strategic objects of study.

Evidence may surface anywhere—in school basements, grandma's attic, a college archive, or an old historical society. Even the federal government is a resource with its national collection, the Archives of American Art, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution. Founded in 1954, the Archives provided a central collecting site at a time when there was neither an institution for the study of American artists nor a professor of American art history. The aim of the Archives was and is to stimulate and encourage research in all areas of American art, by acquiring and preserving student journals, notebooks, sketchbooks, gallery announcements, invitations, letters, and bills of sale. Today these are available to researchers through five regional centers where one may view on microfilm a vast treasury of historical data on American art. Once students' minds are directed to the search for actual detective work, possible discoveries can occur anywhere.

### One Student's Find

One of our graduate students, Ray Lund, found an object that provoked his curiosity because he, as an art teacher, could imagine its significance. Ray visited a friend who showed him skeletal remains of an oak frame on which was rolled a paper scroll with

colored ink printing. Though much of whatever this object had been was no longer there, enough remained to pique Ray's curiosity and prompt his research. He brought this shard of Victoriana to our class, and together the group speculated about what it was, where it was used, and why it might have been valued. Though I knew exactly what this object was and indeed had seen several whole editions of it, Ray's own archeological reconstruction of the object was critical to his learning. His achievement was revealed in his slides, used to lecture before the class, which demonstrated how closely he had learned to examine his object for clues. With his camera he isolated critical features of the 20th century republication of the 1890s Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk (see Figure 1). Ray found out that this single object's vast popularity throughout the 1890s and early 20th century was due to its embodiment of the hopes and dreams of American families.

From my teaching collection of historical objects and ephemera, I was able to provide Ray with documents that helped him interpret the Chautauqua Art Desk. From Lewis E. Myers & Company, makers of the desk, also came booklets for parents—to assist their children—on the use of the desk: *The Home Teacher* (Vanderpoel, 1913b), first appearing in 1903, subsequently reissued in 1913 and 1926, and *Child Life* (Vanderpoel, 1913a) of 1910, reissued in 1913. From these Ray gleaned data that was available nowhere else. The "Forward" of *Child Life* shockingly begins: "The next great step in race culture may be in the direction of society determining who and what kind of child may be born, for all the social problems now being studied, whether commercial, educational, political, or religious, our findings carry us back to a solution in the welfare and fitness of the individual child (p. 3)". The yellowing pages of this Myers pamphlet reveal the terrors that Americans felt resulting from the burgeoning industrialization and mass immigration. The fears are explicit. "As the school becomes radically vocational, many of most alarming social problems will disappear (p. 3)". The Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk was seen as nothing less than a tool in solving social problems. Lewis E. Myers & Company's marketing strategy of the Chautauqua Art Desk ensnared adult buyers by appealing to their hopes and fears. The Chautauqua Art Desk is evidence of how America demanded that the home become the teacher of the young and

embodies the growing rivalry between home and school as educational institutions.

From his investigation of the shard of the Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk, Ray could see concretely how directions of the history of art education emerged with intensity as flesh-and-blood responses to perceived human crises. The desk visualized all information. Though pictorial learning bridged all subject areas, educators barely considered the age and ability of young learners. Little in the desk suggested its creators were interested in how children drew spontaneously. The desk scroll represented a strange fusing of early copyist art education with more child-centered expressive notions carried over from the Child Study Movement. This one single ephemeral object, the art desk, permitted an object-based research of the history of art education that opened up a multitude of possible directions.

### Conclusion

By the end of each course I have been impressed by how the teacher's refined questions have hooked them, as Arnheim said. Their final studies are tied to the original, overly broad question voiced early in the course. They have learned to respect their own interests, to use their needs in their personal lives and in the schools as a filter for obtaining new, useable, manageable information. They have accepted their professional curiosity and found historical colleagues, mentors, and traces of these people in the objects that remain. Their interest in people led them to look at and wonder about their things.

The students who are teachers are now beginning to write and publish their research. Significantly, before there were historians of American art there were historians of American art education. Whether people wanted to see it or not, whether they liked it or not, Americans were learning, teaching, and expressing their ideas in visual art. America's growing interest in art was documented by art educators before art historians, because as educators they viewed art from their broad-

based contact with beginners. Art educators continue to be the people who see the connections. By anchoring our historical research in ephemera, artifacts, and physical facts, we may continue to fill in some historical blind spots: the study of art in past childhoods and of Americans as beginners in art.

No longer should teachers consider historical research an arcane, mysterious, or dry pursuit. History explains where we are and is grounded in everyday life. At the same time, research provides a set of instruments, devices for distancing ourselves from the "set" that we may accept as the only reality. Quotes from the students themselves reveal their attitudes. "My own enthusiasm for history surprised me." "I saw that my work was only a continuation, feeling connected." "Links between people truly exist. The person who originates an idea is seconded by those who actually implement those ideas." "I am surprised by how interested I am in history. That was always a subject I was afraid to take in school because it never related to what was important to me."

In summary, by distancing ourselves into the past, we separate ourselves from our immediate pressures and may feel free to think. This distancing meets a critical professional need of any educator, and historical research is one means of obtaining it.

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