



# Survey Says...

As approaches to art history evolve,  
so does the ground from which all art grows

**BY DUSHKO PETROVICH**

**ILLUSTRATION BY MARIO WAGNER**

Curricular changes rarely make headlines even in the confines of a college town, but after Yale University's art history department announced plans to revamp its introductory survey courses with global offerings less focused on Europe and the United States, the news prompted a national outcry. As reported by the *Yale Daily News* this past January in a story that spread far and wide, the long-standing course "Introduction to Art History: Renaissance to the Present" would be replaced by a selection of thematic classes: "Art and Politics," "Global Craft," "The Silk Road," and "Sacred Places." The "Introduction to Art History" would return in a revised form, the department said, and the "Renaissance to the Present" would still be covered—just not altogether in an exclusive introduction to the field.

Nevertheless, the dismantling of a monolithic course into component parts was mourned by some with deathly rhetoric that compared faculty members to murderers and dictators. A headline in the conservative journal *Commentary* read "Yale's Art Department Commits Suicide." The *New York Post* announced "Barbarians at Yale: PC idiocy kills classic art history class." And a piece in the *Spectator* by James Panero was titled, simply, "Stalin at Yale."

Writing on behalf of his fellow faculty to the College Art Association, Yale department chair Tim Barringer—himself a specialist in European art—responded dryly to the attacks: "Stalin murdered nine million people, while our Department is offering four, rather than two, 100-level

courses. The parallel is imprecise, to say the least." Wanting to further deflect accusations of iconoclasm, Barringer presented the move as "expansive rather than reductive," positioning the changes as part of an effort "to offer Yale undergraduates a range of introductory courses that do justice to the diversity of our faculty's research, of Yale's collections, and of the student body itself."

Overheated as it was, the flare-up did serve to highlight the stakes of settling on a suitable Art History 101 in a field always negotiating contentious phases of evolution. If art historians themselves responded to the drama with a collective yawn, that's only because this fight—with varying levels of dissent and resolution—has been going on for decades within every art history program in the country. Indeed, Yale was among the last to publicly enter the fray. Maybe that tardiness, combined with Yale's reputation as a leader in arts education, qualified the shift as news. But the underlying story—the "globalization" of art history as it plays out in department meetings, journals, and lecture halls around the country—has been long and ongoing.

Changes register most perceptibly at the survey level. And survey classes maintain an outside influence: for dedicated students of the arts, they provide a crucial introduction to the field; for other students—biology majors, say—surveys are often their only exposure to art history. So whether revisions count as dramatic (rethinking and restructuring as at Yale) or subtle (year-to-year tweaks to a syllabus), they have complex ramifications in the realm of art history and beyond. They impact how museums function and how art itself gets created and discussed. And they figure into the answers to essential



**Old School** German art historian Anton Heinrich Springer.

questions: Where did art come from? What has art done and what is it doing now? Where should art go in the future?

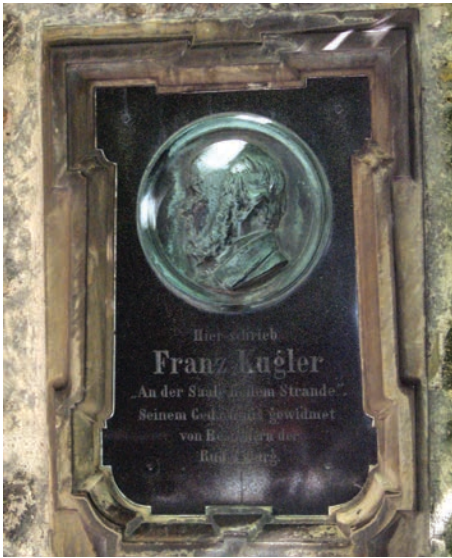
#### ART HISTORY WAS ESTABLISHED

as a discipline in Europe in the middle of the 19th century, and it maintained an overwhelmingly European focus when it migrated to America. But the earliest survey texts weren't focused exclusively on the West. As Mitchell Schwarzer wrote in "Origins of the Art History Survey Text"—one of several important essays in a watershed issue of *Art Journal* assembled under the title "Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey" in 1995—many of the discipline's foundational tomes were decidedly global. Franz Kugler's *Handbook of Art History*, published in Germany in 1842, declared itself the first comprehensive book on the subject and had geographic span to match. Debuting a year later, Karl Schnaase's eight-volume *History of the Fine Arts* argued that belief systems inherited across cultures were key to understanding any civilization's artworks. And Anton Heinrich Springer's detail-oriented studies emphasized the inclusion of all peoples as an organizing principle.

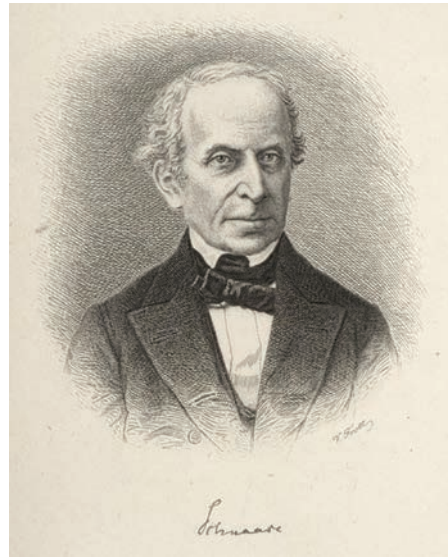
Art from beyond the West—Africa, Asia, Oceania, the Americas—all received ample attention in early survey texts. Crucially, however, these cultures' achievements were presented, as Schwarzer put it, as "foundation stones for the development of higher forms of artistic expression in Europe." Looking at broad spans of time, early art historians wanted to establish hierarchies of achievement among nations, and despite their various philosophical and methodological differences, the founding



**On Campus**  
Yale University in  
New Haven, Conn.



Memorial plaque for Franz Theodor Kugler at Rudelsburg Castle.



Portrait of Karl Schnaase.

fathers of art history settled on ancient Greece and medieval Germany as the highest points on this vast timeline. And making the connection between classical and Renaissance culture laid the foundation for the subsequent high point: modern Europe. Once that task was complete, Schwarzer writes, the secondary characters were ushered offstage as the focus shifted to Europe's own development: "Non-European art was almost completely excluded from the later and crucial stages of art historical development."

It's not difficult to see how the development of art history as a discipline, which Schwarzer describes as a nationalizing project for Germany, served as a template for similar efforts in the U.S., a Christian democracy whose elites saw themselves in the lineage of ancient Greeks and Anglo-Saxons. America aspired to be another cultural culmination, in other words, and after World War II, while the narrative of inheriting Europe's status was bolstered by political and economic dominance, cultural education had a role to play. American industrialists had been able to buy European masterworks at cut rates during the Great Depression, and the exile of leading art historians from Nazi Germany brought many experts to the U.S. Fired from the University of Hannover because he was Jewish, the legendary Erwin Panofsky went first to New York University and ended up at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. The Byzantinist Richard Krautheimer fled Marburg for the University of Louisville before going to Vassar. Rembrandt scholar Julius Held landed at Barnard—the list goes on and on, and while American universities became beneficiaries of this tremen-

dous art historical expertise, unprecedented numbers of working-class men were attending college via the G.I. Bill, wanting to get "cultured." Enter the survey.

**UNLIKE MOST EDUCATIONAL** experiences in the arts, which are eccentric and personalized, survey courses tend to be standardized, scripted, and very theatrical. Enrollments can swell into the hundreds, so the lecture halls are huge, the projections are huge, and the pressure to perform is huge. Impressionable minds might fall asleep, or they might be moved to applause. And the amount of material to be covered means impostor syndrome abounds even among the most seasoned leaders in the field. Many of the professors I spoke with said the introductory art history survey was the hardest course they had taught. It requires a certain personality type to survive, much less thrive.

I was lucky, as an undergraduate at Yale, to study with the man whom many regard

as the master of the form, the late Vincent Scully. I didn't take his "Introduction to Art History: Renaissance to the Present" but rather his "Modern Architecture" course, and the lectures were, in fact, astounding. In one class, on his way to telling us how Maya Lin, when she was his student, won the commission for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., as an undergraduate, Scully linked the assassination of Kennedy with the assassination of Julius Caesar and wrapped it all up with stirring evocations of the follies of empire and the fragility of democracy. I remember Scully getting choked up as he told us where he was when he heard about JFK's assassination, and I remember seeing the watery eyes of my classmates as the lights came up in the room at the end. That lecture, like many others, was sent off with thunderous applause from those of us in the audience. The subject we were studying, we almost had to remind ourselves, was the stolid architecture of war memorials, but Scully had made it moving and real for all of us. We felt that, through his lectures, we weren't just hearing about history but entering it directly.

But by that point art history was already moving on. Owing in part to the civil rights movement and the women's movement, the demographics of universities across the country had shifted dramatically since the postwar prime of the Western survey. And scholarship had been changing too—enough so that in 1995 Mark Miller Graham, a historian of Mesoamerican art, wrote in that same "Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey" issue of *Art Journal*, "I don't think that there is now any justification for confining the introductory courses in art history to the art of the West." That he had to make such an assertion tells you that it was still very contested, but by the '90s many leading programs had already revised their surveys.

Several of those efforts are described in that same issue of *Art Journal*. Svetlana Alpers's "History of Art 15," a new survey

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Images from Karl Whittington's lecture on Islamic architecture: Left to right, Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; a page from the Blue Qur'an; and a replica of the "Pisa Griffin" above the apse of the Pisa Cathedral.

course she was leading at the University of California, Berkeley, enlisted an interdisciplinary roster of faculty—including a philosopher, a psychologist, a painter, an anthropologist, and a curator—to join eight art historians giving lectures from their varying areas of expertise. Linnea Dietrich and Diane Smith-Hurd emphasized that the practical details—scheduling, who leads discussion, exam techniques—were as important as the content in their experiments with feminist approaches to the survey at Miami University and the Art Academy of Cincinnati, respectively. Hollis Clayson and Michael Leja reflect candidly on "Introduction to Visual Culture," their contribution to a suite of five survey courses at Northwestern University introduced "to offset the effects of the longstanding dominance of our curriculum by European and Euro-American arts to the exclusion or shortchanging of other traditions."

#### DAVID GETSY, NOW A PROFESSOR

of art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (where I also teach), had been planning to major in philosophy when he enrolled in the art history survey at Oberlin College—"literally to have something to talk about at cocktail parties," he recalled. Instead of giving him names to drop, Patricia Mathews's class employed a "political model of art history" that inspired Getsy to switch majors and then go to Northwestern for his doctorate, where the "global" curriculum was being put into place. Getsy described his trajectory as typical. "Most

of the people who have been trained in the last 20 years," he said, "have been trained to think about global questions."

A common move during the global turn of the '90s was to flank the traditional Euro-American survey that had served as a singular introduction to the field with similarly structured courses focused on other continents. Ohio State University, to take just one example, has offered East Asian and Latin American surveys alongside a two-part Western survey for decades now. At the same time, budgetary limitations and patterns of enrollment have helped the West remain the focus by default. OSU's Africa survey fell away nine years ago when the department lost its Africanist and wasn't granted a rehire, and losing specialists in Islamic and South Asian art further curtailed their surveys' potential

span. "It's hard to do everything you want to do with the resources you have," Karl Whittington, OSU chair of undergraduate studies, told me. In his own position, he has incorporated his expertise in architecture to introduce five lectures on Islamic art to "Western I," which he currently teaches, while at the same time pleading with the university to bring specialists in other areas back to the department.

Though the area-by-area approach is a popular one—granting different continents their own spotlight and allowing faculty to teach within their areas of expertise—many see it as an intermediary and only partial correction. And it undercuts one of the survey's abiding goals: establishing shared points of reference. Separating landmasses can also sideline the role that international trade, colonization, and migration

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have played in art history, topics especially pertinent to the American context.

“We can’t just wall people off in a society where people mix together,” Nell Irvin Painter, a renowned historian of the American South, told me. She is in favor of a fully integrated global survey, in part because it wasn’t what she experienced when, after she retired from a storied career in the history department at Princeton, she went back to school to study art. The art history survey she took as part of her enrollment at Rutgers University, Painter said, was basically “Western art with one [non-West-

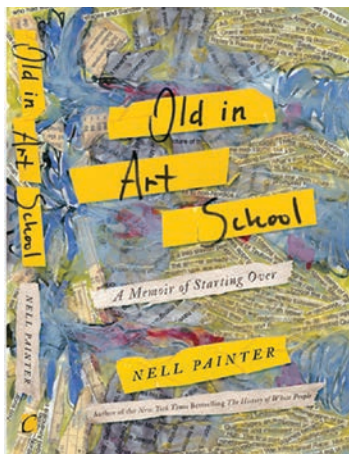
ern] chapter tacked on at the end.”

The problem at Yale, which had caught her attention, wasn’t the singular introductory course but rather its focus on Europe, Painter said. “There is a place for a course in art history without modifiers, but it needs to be global.” She also favors chronology because a global timeline forces students, as well as the art historians teaching them, to confront shared histories—of slavery, of colonization, of the subjugation of women—that they might otherwise avoid. As Painter put it, “It’s hard for them to say, ‘Yeah, we’re working

out of an exclusionary tradition.”

Few faculty have the expertise to teach a truly global class on their own, so a common solution has been team-teaching, with several voices replacing the lone lecturer onstage. Though born of necessity, several people I spoke with saw this polyphonic structure as a symbolic improvement too. As critic and former art historian Aruna D’Souza put it, it gets rid of the “old man tells you everything you need to know” model of teaching. Steven Nelson, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, echoed the feeling when I asked him

Top: Joambarjo. Bottom, left to right: Counterpoint Press; David Buchan/Variety/Shutterstock; Harry Lou Works on Paper.



**Polymath** Left to right, the cover of Nell Irvin Painter’s most recent book; Painter on a panel for the television show *The Gilded Age*; a 2017 self portrait.

about alternatives to Eurocentric classic textbooks such as H. W. Janson's *History of Art*. "I want students to encounter messiness, and a variety of voices, because art is messy itself." And in navigating that mess, Nelson added, "The challenge is giving multiple points of access."

Since following a strict timeline doesn't always serve this goal, many schools have shifted to thematic courses that reach across geography and chronology without any claim of comprehensiveness or canonicity. Yale's new 100-level offerings follow along these lines, and their short titles—"Art and Politics," "Global Craft," "The Silk Road," and "Sacred Places"—do a fair job of summarizing the variations that are possible with this approach, where ideas, materials, trade routes, or social uses of art can all be used to narrate an introduction to the field.

Tasked with revamping the pre-1850 survey at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the country's largest art school, Jennifer Nelson structured the curriculum around specific materials that anchored her students' various studio departments: printmaking, painting, ceramics, and so on. A week devoted to fiber, for instance, jumps from Liangzhou looms and Mamluk silks to Flemish tapestries and Aboriginal biting bags, all before landing on Juan Bautista Cuiris's *Christ and Madonna*, whose pixel-bright hues were made with hummingbird feathers in the 1590s.

The class ends with an invitation to students to consider and create their own canons—a version of the task that professors have been dealing with in recent years. Nelson said that improvised canon formation was her favorite part of the class, because it was where she could directly engage her students in what she calls "the biggest question" of the survey: "responsibly talking about a common approach."



**Images from Steven Nelson's lecture on African art:** Left to right, a 16th-century ivory pendant mask from the Kingdom of Benin; Khoshi Mahumbu (right) dancing the mask character Mbangu in Nyoka-Munene, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1989; a central African power figure from the 19th century.

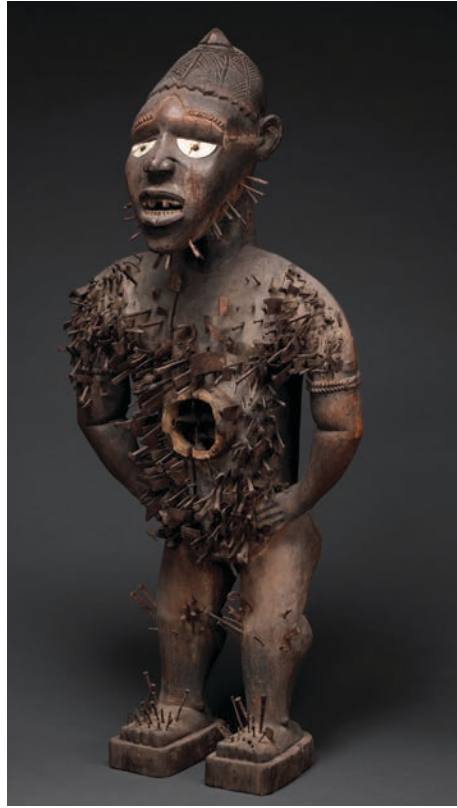
**AT MUSEUMS, THE EQUIVALENT OF** a survey is the permanent-collection display. Often the only section certain visitors see and what they see repeatedly if they return, it's the foundation of a museum's reputation and, increasingly—with examples including the Museum of Modern Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Baltimore Museum of Art; and many more—the means through which institutions are attempting to showcase a less

exclusionary approach. To those working in art history, the changes are familiar. As Steven Nelson put it, "It's a 3-D version of rethinking the Western survey."

In a *New York Times* article this past March headlined "America's Big Museums on the Hot Seat," Holland Cotter argued for the urgency of this rethinking while asserting that institutions "need to reconsider their own role as history-tellers and history-inventors." He also set such



**Images from Professor Jennifer Nelson's lecture on fiber arts:** Left to right, a 14th-century textile fragment by a Mamluk maker; an early 20th-century biting bag; Juan Bautista Cuiris's *Christ and Madonna*, 1590s.



thinking in the context of what had happened at Yale, writing, “in fact, Yale made the right decision in eliminating a course whose very title implied that the history of world art and the history of Western art were equivalent.”

D’Souza, whose writings include the 2018 book *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*, also makes links between recent institutional developments and how museum professionals have been educated. “We’re seeing a disconnect between how a lot of senior curators were trained and the questions they are facing,” she told me of institutional leaders who came up through a different course of history. “They are basically doing a re-training now.”

D’Souza spoke of the importance of such initiatives as MoMA’s research project C-MAP (Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives), which brought in scholars of Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European modernism, and the similar UBS Map Global Art Initiative at the Guggenheim, which has featured art from South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Commending such changes, Connie Butler, chief curator at the Hammer Museum, emphasized the role that flagship institutions have in validating—or not validating—how other aspects of the art world operate. “If on the walls at MoMA

there are many more works by women artists and artists of color, telling histories that are not well known by the mainstream art world, that validates galleries’ ability to tell people to collect that work,” she said.

Having taken a Eurocentric survey in the ’80s and later teaching her own—which she started, pointedly, with Native American architecture—Butler told me she approached her work on her groundbreaking 2007 exhibition “WACK!: Art

and the Feminist Revolution” explicitly in terms of Art History 101, noting “how little of that art was found in any of those survey textbooks.” While affirming how changes in academia can drive museum practices, Butler was also emphatic about the role that museums have played to give a much-needed push to scholarship. “If the field hadn’t revolutionized itself,” she said of art history taking cues from institutions, “it would have become completely irrelevant.”

D’Souza welcomes the increasing multiplicity on display in museums. “Globalizing the discipline is everyone’s responsibility, not just [that of] the people studying non-Western art. The idea of ‘everyone speaking the same language’ is a colonialist project. No one ever says to English-speakers that they have to learn all these other languages.”

The biggest challenge in constructing a cultural lingua franca for art history in the U.S. might be exactly that: we all have to learn other cultural “languages.” Messier than memorizing movements and monuments, the project that the new art history survey has taken on—in a wide variety of still-experimental formats—is to undo what David Gettsy called “the network of blindnesses” that previous legacies put in place. The reorientation means that instead of gaining expertise about a legacy of specific masterworks, we instead have to take on a project that is less comfortable: constantly studying our own ignorance.

Nell Irvin Painter pointed out how difficult this can be for established scholars, especially. But, expressing a sentiment echoed by everyone I talked to who had taught at the survey level, she stressed the importance of doing so: “The big hurdle is that you have to remake yourself,” she said. “You have to reeducate yourself.” ■

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