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Letter from the editor: climate change in art history publishing

Susan Bielstein

- 1 The first several decades of art history publishing in the US evolved in train to the growth of the discipline in universities. How the discipline expanded in this country over the course of the twentieth century has been well documented.¹ What is also coming to be understood is how art history and, indeed, all the humanities and arts flourished in the 50s and early 60s thanks to the advancement of a democratic cultural agenda in counterpoise to the socialist aesthetics of the Soviet Union and China. But what about the less visible apparatus that had to be forged to create an ecosystem in which the discipline could thrive – the system of academic publishing that vets scholarly productions, including specialized monographs?² A system that, like the bridges and highways built during the same era, is now dreadfully overtaxed. Art history in the twenty-first century has become a genuinely global enterprise, with scholars all over the world in need of reliable outlets for their work. Now that English has become the lingua franca of the discipline, the pressure on American university presses to serve this proliferating network is greater than ever. This essay discusses how the system of scholarly book publishing born in a different time has changed and why it will change further.³
- 2 Through the first half of the twentieth century, a handful of American commercial publishers served the young discipline rather nicely: Holt, Pantheon, G.P. Putnam's Sons, and Doubleday all published the most lustrous studies written by the most famous scholars.⁴ Among the university presses, Princeton, with one of the oldest art history programs in the country, got into the game early, publishing in 1912 E. Baldwin Smith's report *The History of Art in Colleges and Universities of the United States*. The press at Princeton also had the wit to capitalize on the distinguished immigrants arriving in New York as the situation in Europe deteriorated, among them, the German art historian Erwin Panofsky. In 1943 the Press issued a translation of his book *Die theoretische Kunstlehre Albrecht Dürers*, under the more saleable title *The Life and Art of Albrecht Durer*, in two volumes.⁵ There were other high spots on the Princeton list:

Walter F. Friedlaender's *Caravaggio Studies* (1955) for one, and Richard Krautheimer's first book in English, co-written with his wife, Trude Krautheimer-Hess, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (1956),⁶ a foundational work in the study of early-modern Italian art.

- 3 As art history continued to expand, commercial publishers still welcomed noteworthy books by the most celebrated historians and critics. Pantheon, for example, co-published Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960), based on his 1956 A.W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., as a volume in the prestigious Bollingen Series.⁷ But who was going to publish the younger scholars coming out of universities and starting to build academic careers of their own? They, too, needed outlets for their research, and not just for the sake of contributing to a field. Journals were of course central to the effort,⁸ but it wasn't long before having a book-length study peer-reviewed and issued by a scholarly publisher became a nearly universal requirement for tenure.
- 4 Presses at universities that boasted strong academic departments in art history rallied to the cause. Princeton set the pace, followed by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale University, de University of California et de University of Chicago. Meanwhile, academic departments continued to professionalize, producing more and more monographs and dissertations that needed to be revised into books and published. Thus, university presses and their editors took on a crucial role in the mechanism of credentialing and advancement.
- 5 On the face of it, this should not have been a problem. Book publishing, like higher education, was a growth industry.⁹ Universities were building state-of-the-art libraries to house the thousands of learned tomes rolling off the presses. It was a good moment to publish art history: paper was reasonably priced, printing technologies sophisticated, and the commercial rights agencies had not yet fully organized into the iron-fisted syndicates they are today, so images could be acquired casually and often for little or no money.¹⁰
- 6 In the mid 80s the New York office of Cambridge University Press decided to commit to an ambitious program that would cover the discipline from A to Z, from antiquity to modernity, from Praxiteles to Pollock, publishing thirty to forty monographs annually.¹¹ The flowering of cultural and media studies led the university presses at Duke and Minnesota to start publishing books in art and visual culture that deepened their broader intellectual commitments. Penn State University Press was building a small, focused program in European art history, while presses at the state universities of Texas, New Mexico, Hawaii, Washington, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and Michigan also published art books that enhanced core strengths they already possessed in regional, Asian, African-American, and Latin American studies.
- 7 Today the chief university presses with substantial art history lists include Yale, MIT, Chicago, California, Penn State, Minnesota, Duke, and Princeton.¹² What sets their lists apart is that they are sponsored by editors who cultivate art history publications as a priority. I am one of those editors. Most of us publish a dozen to twenty-five art books annually.¹³ Sometimes, we are fortunate to bring books into the world that profoundly enrich the discipline, and the culture at large.
- 8 Which leads me back to Gombrich. In a recent book, Richard Shone and John-Paul Stonard cite *Art and Illusion* as one of the principal books to have shaped art history in the twentieth century.¹⁴ That's doubtless true, but here we are, well into the twenty-first by fifteen years. As a publisher who works "in the now," I'm curious to know what

the new generation of art historians think are important books, so those are the people I turned to for help in researching this article. I dispatched a questionnaire to 30 art historians in the United States (of whom 20 responded), and, through the good offices of Anne Lafont, editor-in-chief of *Perspective*, to 23 more in French-speaking countries (of whom ten responded)¹⁵. The questionnaire asked art historians to name the books that had been most influential during their early studies in art history and their formation as graduate students developing a specialty.

- 9 I also invited participants to opine on which books, if any, every art historian today should read—a difficult question given the diversity of fields, critical agendas, and cross-disciplinary encounters that characterize art history today: Indeed, as one respondent answered tersely: “The question is never asked in my program, as a matter of principle.”¹⁶
- 10 I hoped the poll would shed light on how American scholars and students use monographs today, and it did. The answer, for the most part, is that they don’t (see boxed text). In fact 80% of the top books listed by American respondents are not scholarly monographs at all but collections of essays or lectures, short essay-length volumes (e.g., Michael Baxandall’s *Patterns of Intention*), or books lightly synthesized from essays around a clearly stated proposition (e.g., Hal Foster’s *Return of the Real*).¹⁷ French speaking respondents offered a more diverse list that included more genuine monographs, though the overlap was noticeable when it came to foundational books.
- 11 To me this is neither good nor bad; it merely reinforces what everybody already says about art history pedagogy in the States: that today’s art historians tend to train from short-form texts provided by instructors in “course-packs” and that few hasten to (purchase and) read whole books apart from the crucial few that directly address their specialized interests. For example, though Hans Belting’s magisterial study of religious imagery before the early modern period, *Bild und Kult*, translated into English as *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*,¹⁸ has obvious implications for the broader discipline, it merited only two mentions by the Americans, a Renaissance scholar and a Latin Americanist. In contrast, the French edition was cited by Francophone scholars working in many fields. Equally telling, not a single American male mentioned the feminist scholars Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, though one Frenchman did. With such hyper-specialization, it’s no wonder that only a tiny handful of monographs enjoy a bustling life following publication. At the University of Chicago Press, we have calculated that most of the art books we publish saturate their markets in about sixteen months, after which sales slow to a trickle, dispelling the fondly-held fantasy that books will be jollied along by course adoption and library purchases. For the most part they will not.
- 12 But wait: one could protest that selling a lot of copies wasn’t the chief reason for publishing those books in the first place. The point was to build a cultural reserve of advanced knowledge and to position it crucially in libraries where scholars and students could access it. To be sure, this is the ideal model upon which scholarly publishing was built, though it hasn’t reflected the reality of the academic marketplace for many years. In fact those all-important library sales have been dropping since the 1970s, but in the past fifteen years, with digital products devouring most of a library’s budget, the decline has been precipitous. The kind of monograph that used to sell 2000 printed copies may now sell fewer than a thousand. And all those specialized “first books” – the revised dissertations that feed the American tenure system – which used

to break even at around 700 copies, may now sell only 300. One reason for this is that few American research libraries place standing orders for books anymore; they are moving to a “patron-centric” model, a nice way of saying that a book will only be considered for purchase if a professor demands it.¹⁹ At the same time, the citizen population of art historians has not contracted in proportion to its reading habits ... but the discipline still insists on its books. Thus art history publishing has become subsidized publishing, with presses calling on authors or their institutions to put up money to help defray the cost of production, which is becoming prohibitive with the diminishing market and print runs, especially if a book needs color illustrations.²⁰

Translations

- 13 Subsidized publishing does not bode well for translations even when funds are available from institutions such as the French Ministry of Culture or the Goethe-Institut. Those subsidies, though appreciated, rarely cover more than a fraction of the fee charged by an experienced translator. As a result, the out-of-pocket expense absorbed by a publisher adds significantly to the unit cost of a monograph in any field – though art history monographs have an even higher hurdle to clear in that the licenses to publish the illustrations generally must be secured anew for the English-language edition. All this – the radical deterioration of monograph sales, the high cost and labor of translation, and the prohibitive reproduction fees for images – militates against translating art history books at all. In a recent report from the Cultural Services of the French Embassy on “French Books Translated [published] into English [in the US in 2015],” graphic novels led the way along with music, poetry, cinema, and children’s literature. The only book on the list that might even begin to pass for art history was Anne Sinclair’s *My Grandfather’s Gallery: A Family Memoir of Art and War* (Picador, rights purchased from Grasset) – a trade biography of art dealer Paul Rosenberg.²¹ Needless to say, the relative dearth of translations has become an enormous frustration for art historians, especially now that English is the bridge language of the discipline. The Swiss author Dario Gamboni remarks: “A drawback of the status of English as a lingua franca is that too many colleagues, especially native speakers of English, assume that whatever is worth reading was either written in or translated into English, which is very far from being the case”.²²
- 14 As a publisher, I approach translation from a somewhat different position. Mine is predicated on the notion that the purpose of translation in the twenty-first century is to communicate with peers in a growing multilingual community, not only native-English speakers. The politics of discourse shift: younger art historians are starting to think less in terms of academic lineage than in terms of a transnational matrix of scholars that resists structures of domination in a field, even if part of that resistance involves, paradoxically, the Englishing of the globe.
- 15 Every American publisher I know wants to work with gifted thinkers, no matter their nationality. And it is a given that US art history has always drawn breath from afar: a scholar trained in another language brings a different cultural syntax to the arena, helping to produce a robust discipline of finely nuanced contours. Yet for all the reasons enumerated, it has become increasingly difficult for US publishers to serve Anglophone art historians, let alone everyone else. There is no perfect solution to the problem. Then again, if the point of translation is global communication, why must the

vehicle of transmission be an Anglophone publisher? French, Spanish, Korean, Turkish publishers can issue books in English themselves, if they choose, in bilingual or even trilingual editions. Art museums have been doing this for generations, and a number of major publishers, including Fayard and Diaphanes, are starting to do it with some regularity.

- 16 Is something lost in translation? Always. Having a grasp of English – indeed, of any language – is subsumed under larger questions of literacy. In other words, just because I can read French doesn't mean I am genuinely literate in the language. By the same token, just because someone can write *technically* in English doesn't mean they enjoy fullness of expression. Knowing this essay will be translated into French prompts me to eschew some of the cherished colloquialisms that normally pepper my prose and to adopt a style of general blandness. So be it. Such is the price of transmission.
- 17 To the scholar, I say concentrate on producing articles for journals and wikis: articles, not books, are where the momentum is in scholarly publishing. The Getty Foundation formerly subsidized monographs, but not anymore. Today their efforts center on digital products and global communication. The Mellon Foundation, which is deeply invested in the health of art history publishing, primarily focuses on how new media can enliven and transform the enterprise.²³ To be clear, it is not my intent to pronounce the art history book dead. There will be art history books as long as there are books. But the action, the gathering force, exists in journals, which in electronic form can offer streaming media, interactive tools, extra articles, and color galore. At Chicago, we have added nine art journals to our portfolio since 2002.²⁴ There will be more.
- 18 Art historians train by studying articles, so let them focus on writing them, too. A young scholar would do well to expand her influence and build a legacy by writing powerfully conceived articles, essays, and reviews so that she may eventually accumulate a volume of work that everyone in the discipline, or at least in her field, will need – and want – to read.
- 19 P.S. When it comes to English-language publishing, may I offer one or two suggestions? First, to non-Anglophone scholars, curb your expectations: do not assume your book will be published in English unless you write it in English – or unless you are willing to pay for a quality translation. Most editors read more than one language, but none of us reads all of them, so be prepared to provide an abstract and a sample chapter in English if you decide to approach us – or, better, ask someone we already publish to contact us about your book. That can sometimes make a difference.

Top Responses from US art historians, listed in descending order

1. When you were a student of art history (either in graduate or undergraduate school), what were the books that everyone in the discipline had to read?

T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (monograph); Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (lectures, much shortened); *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (essay-length book, “a primer”); Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*

(essay-length book); Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History* (short monograph); Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (lectures primarily based on articles, some pre-published); Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Illusion* (lectures); Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (monograph); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (essays); Rosalind Krauss, *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (essays); Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (essays; female respondents only); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (essays); Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (essays; female respondents only).

2. As a graduate student developing a specialty, what were the books that were must-reads in your field or sub-field?

Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (essays, lightly synthesized); Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (essays); Rosalind Krauss, *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (essays); T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (essays); Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (essays); Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (essays); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (essays); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (essays); Clement Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism* (essays in 4 volumes); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (monograph, of which two chapters previously published as essays).

3. As a graduate student, what were the languages you were required to be able to read? French; German

4. What do you consider to be the lingua franca of art history today? English. What were the crucial languages when you were in graduate school (and when was that)? German and French until 2000; after that, not so much.

5. Are there any books today that everyone who is an art historian must read? Only Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* garnered multiple citations.

6. What is your field or sub-field? 50% twentieth century (including African Diaspora, Latin America, Middle East, Chinese, Japanese), contemporary, performance, and media; 25% early modern; 25% other.

7. Do you teach in any cross-disciplinary programs? 10 respondents out of 20 said yes.

8. Are you working on a digital humanities project that will have a public face? Four respondents said yes.

Top Responses from Francophone Art Historians, listed in descending order

In contrast to the Americans, the French often listed authors and their corpus rather than specific titles.

1. When you were a student of art history (either in graduate or undergraduate school), what were the books that everyone in the discipline had to read?

Ernst Gombrich, *L'Art et l'illusion: Psychologie de la représentation picturale*; Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principes fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art*; Svetlana Alpers, *L'Art de dépeindre: La Peinture hollandaise du XVII^e siècle*; Erwin Panofsky, *La Perspective comme forme symbolique*; Erwin Panofsky, *Essais d'iconologie : thèmes humanistes dans l'art de la Renaissance*; Rosalind Krauss, *L'Originalité de l'avant-garde et autres mythes modernistes*; André Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique*; André Chastel, *Fables, formes, figures*; Michael Baxandall, *L'Œil du Quattrocento: l'usage de la peinture dans l'Italie de la Renaissance*; Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société; Études de sociologie de l'art*; Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*; Henri Focillon, *La Vie des formes*.

2. As a graduate student developing a specialty, what were the books that were must-reads in your field or sub-field?

T.J. Clark, *Painting of Modern Life; Image of the People*; Henri Zerner, Charles Rosen, *Romantisme et réalisme : mythes de l'art du XIX^e siècle*; Daniel Roche, *The Rise of Consumer Culture*; Werner Hofmann, *Das irdische Paradies: Kunst im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*; Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*; Hans Belting, *Image et culte*; Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in late Eighteenth-Century Paris*; Hubert Damisch (works).

3. As a graduate student, what were the languages you were required to be able to read? (Please indicate your specialization.)

French and English first and foremost, then Italian and German.

4. What do you consider to be the lingua franca of art history today? English. What were the crucial languages when you were in graduate school (and when was that)? English, French, some German.

5. Are there any books today that everyone who is an art historian must read? If so, what are they, and are they available in English? Daniel Arasse (works); Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail : pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*; Michael Baxandall (works); Hans Belting (works); Michael Fried (works).

6. What is your field or sub-field? 40% of the respondents work thematically across periods in museum studies and collecting, with links to the social sciences. 30% work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art, 20% in African, 20% in medieval (including African), 20% on modern and contemporary.

7. Do you teach in any cross-disciplinary programs? 7 out of 10 respondents said yes.

8. Are you working on a digital humanities project that will have a public face? 6 out of 10 said yes.

NOTES

1. *The Art Bulletin* was founded in 1913. For a historical perspective, see Andrew C. Ritchie et al., *The Visual Arts in Higher Education*, New Haven, 1966. The report offers a state of the discipline (programs with faculty and enrollments in art history as well as in studio art) in the crucial years following WWII and will lead the reader to earlier, useful reports. For more recent data and analysis, I consulted a PowerPoint by College Art Association President Linda Downs (2014) about statistics derived from CAA directories of graduate programs; a set of bar charts by Michael Goodman, CAA IT director, presenting numbers of faculty in particular subject categories; and the dissertation titles published each year in *caa.reviews*, which are organized by specialization.
2. When I refer to “monographs” I mean fully synthesized books with arguments that unfold from the beginning to the end of the text and must be so read to be understood.
3. See Hilary Ballon, Mariët Westermann, *Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age*, Houston, 2006.
4. For example, Pantheon published the Bollingen Series, which included many important works in art history. Holt co-published the first English-language edition of Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, New York, 1932. G. P. Putnam’s Sons published several of Bernard Berenson’s early books, including *Lorenzo Lotto: An Essay in Constructive Art Criticism*, New York/London, 1895. Doubleday Anchor issued Panofsky’s *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1956.
5. Published in 1915 by G. Reimer based on Panofsky’s 1914 dissertation. Panofsky taught at both NYU and Princeton before joining the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, N.J., in 1935.
6. Walter F. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, New York, 1955; Richard Krautheimer, Trude Krautheimer-Hess, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton, 1970. My thanks to Beatrice Rehl, editorial director for the humanities at Cambridge University Press, for sharing her prodigious knowledge of the history of art history publishing.
7. Published simultaneously in 1960 by Pantheon in the US and Phaidon in the UK. Pantheon published the Bollingen series starting in 1949. In 1967 Princeton University Press took over the series.
8. See Ritchie, 1966, cited n. 1, p. 47.
9. At the time, there were innumerable young people to educate, including military veterans of WWII and the Korean War. Veterans were able to go to college with the help of the United States GI Bill of Rights (1944), which included a provision that paid tuition and a living stipend.
10. Though even in the 1960s, publishing subsidies were sometimes needed. See Ritchie, 1966, cited n. 1, p. 49-50.
11. Information provided by Beatrice Rehl.
12. In 2003 Cambridge discontinued its art history list except from ancient art and archaeology. Since then it has restored some acquisitions in European art before 1700 to support its history list.

13. These lists also include architecture, design, visual theory, photography as well as some media and film/cinema.
14. Richard Shone, John-Paul Stonard eds., *The Books That Shaped Art History from Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, London, 2013. For “pragmatic reasons,” the editors limited their selection to sixteen books “rather than sixty.”
15. Like Shone and Stonard, for pragmatic reasons, I limited my poll to US and French speaking scholars. US respondents ranged in age from 28 to 69 years, with a mean age of 40. I do not know the ages of the French speaking respondents. For the US poll, my sample was formulated from the relative popularity of specialties in the universities. Consulting the CAA dissertation database I learned that in the United States about a third of art history graduate students specialize in twentieth century and contemporary art, performance, and media, about a third in early modern Europe, followed by medieval and area studies in Latin America, China, Middle East, Japan, and then ancient art and archaeology. For the French speaking poll, I asked Anne Lafont to choose a representative group of participants.
16. Response of Caroline Jones, June 21, 2015. She is professor of history, theory and criticism in the Architecture School of the MIT.
17. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On The Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven, 1985; Hal Foster, *The Return of The Real: The Avant-Garde At The End of The Century*, Cambridge, 1996.
18. *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990. Published in English by the University of Chicago Press in 1994; and in French as *Image et culte : une histoire de l'image avant l'époque de l'art* by the éditions du Cerf in 1998.
19. Michelle Foss, “Books-on-Demand: An Innovative ‘Patron-Centric’ approach to enhance the library collection,” http://admin.seflin.org/committee/documents/books_on_demandprogram.doc (viewed October 5, 2015).
20. This is not the same as vanity publishing. At university presses, manuscripts must undergo peer review before the press will consider publishing it. Once a book’s quality has been confirmed, a publisher calculates how much subsidy will be needed to produce the book and, importantly, to price it affordably.
21. It is hard not to believe the author(s) of the report may have overlooked some titles published in English in 2015, though they claim it is a thorough accounting. Anne Sinclair, Shaun Whiteside, *My Grandfather’s Gallery: A Family Memoir of Art and War*, New York, 2014 [ed. orig.: 21, rue La Boétie, Paris, 2012].
22. French speaking sample: Dario Gamboni in “Questionnaire,” response to #4, July 30, 2015.
23. Among other programs, Mellon does sponsor the Art History Publishing Initiative (AHPI, www.arthistorypi.org) involving the presses at Pennsylvania, Penn State, Duke, and Washington. The initiative subsidizes first books, which are published in both print and digital form, but the driving motivation is to “help bring the publication of illustrated art history books into the digital age” (<http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/books/series/AHPI.html>, viewed October 5, 2015).
24. *American Art; Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry; West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture; I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance; Metropolitan Museum Journal; Getty Research Journal; Gesta; Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America; and Archives of American Art Journal.*

INDEX

Geographical index: États-Unis

Mots-clés: édition, monographie, système universitaire américain, lingua franca, histoire de l'art global

Keywords: publishing, art history monograph, American post-WWII university, lingua franca, global art history

Chronological index: 1900, 2000

AUTHORS

SUSAN BIELSTEIN

The University of Chicago Press