Loose Canons: Defining Essential Visual Culture in the Art History Survey Textbook

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Vignette 1: The eager college freshman, an aspiring studio art major, has registered for the Introduction to Art History course. Arriving at the campus bookstore to purchase her textbook, she is dismayed to learn that it is priced at nearly one hundred dollars. Perhaps, she ponders, she could split the cost with a classmate. . . . or do her required reading using a reserve copy in the library. However, the graduate teaching assistant at the first class session warns that each student should buy a personal copy: “Everything you’ll need to know for the exams is in there. Besides, it’s a good investment: since it has pictures of all the great works, you can use it as a reference in other courses you take. But be sure to get the new edition—it’s different from the old one.” So much for finding a used copy and saving a few dollars, our freshman sighs.

Vignette 2: Elsewhere on campus, an associate professor presents the visual resources curator with a massive tome: an examination copy of the newest edition of a popular art history survey textbook—quite a handful at seven centimeters thick, and weighing nearly eleven pounds. “Good news: enrollment’s up this semester,” he announces cheerily. “We’ve had to add two more sections of intro art history. Fred and I will stick with Stokstad, but Andrea and that adjunct instructor we just hired want to use this new edition of Gardner’s. Better make sure we have slides of every illustration.” As the professor departs, the VR curator flips through the 1,200 glossy pages with a sinking feeling of déjà vu: Didn’t we go through this process of switching survey texts two years ago? Don’t all of the major titles provide pretty much the same coverage anyway? And there seem to be so many slides we added back then that no one has ever really used . . .

The illustrated art history survey textbook is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, and has evolved along with the academic discipline it serves. The extent of its coverage and its mode of presentation have been shaped by technological advances in printing and photography; changing economic conditions in the academic publishing marketplace; and evolving perceptions regarding culturally significant issues such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and geo-cultural politics. Yet within this shifting environment there has been among users an underlying assumption, often fostered by authors and publishers, in which the heart of each book consists of a changeless “canon” of the greatest works of art. The intent of this article is to examine whether this perception is valid or whether the concept of the canon presented in the textbooks is itself both flexible and evolutionary.

This study of canonical coverage in survey textbooks represents a personal continuation of a project originally begun by a team of art historians and visual resources curators on behalf of the Academic Image Cooperative. The team set out in 1999, under the aegis of the Digital Libraries Federation, to chart convergent textbook coverage as one way of identifying some 2,500 works of art and architecture required to teach the traditional survey course. I have expanded upon this original AIC project with a chapter-by-chapter (and, in some instances, a work-by-work) tabulation of the contents of all eleven editions of Art Through the Ages, originally authored by Helen Gardner.1 Also compared were the six numbered editions of H. W. Janson’s History of Art, and the two editions each of the other full-year comprehensive survey texts with current major market share: Marilyn Stokstad’s Art History and Laurie Schneider Adams’ Art Across Time. Although no new editions have appeared of Frederick Hartt’s Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture since the author’s death nearly a decade ago, this title, which formerly enjoyed considerable market share and influence, provided a useful point of reference. Finally, I have also noted the coverage provided by several single-semester condensed surveys, including those by Gombrich, Honour and Fleming, and Wilkins and Schultz, as well as the three general architectural histories by Kostof, Trachtenberg, and Watkins.2 Not only have these publications attempted to provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether there actually exists, by consensus, a consistent corpus of works of art regarded as fundamental benchmarks of stylistic development and aesthetic quality, but they have also assumed a major role in defining and shaping popular perceptions of what this canon includes.

The terms “canon” and “canonical” are based on the Greek word kanon, meaning that which exemplifies a rule, formula, or accepted standard. In the early Christian church, canon acquired the additional meaning of an authorized list (such as of scripture believed to be divinely inspired). Within the discipline of art history there has often been an implicit—and sometimes explicit—assumption that most knowledgeable insiders would concur regarding a canonical list of the world’s greatest monuments and most significant works of art. This position was clearly articulated by Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, joint authors of Gardner’s sixth through ninth editions, in their prefatory remarks (6th ed., vi):

Because . . . a corpus of monuments essential to the art history survey course has long been forming, and . . . there seems to be considerable agreement as to what constitutes it . . . radical departure from [this] corpus might well obliterate the outlines of the study. To avoid the random, systemless distribution of material that might result we have generally adhered to [this] corpus . . . . Our aim throughout has been
to present and interpret works as reflections of an intelligible development rather than merely as items of a catalog or miscellany.

Since this acknowledged list of masterworks, the argument goes, has been shaped by both common assent and the imprimatur of respected experts in the field, it is reasonable to expect that anyone wanting to claim visual literacy in the arts must become conversant with it.

The modern art history survey textbook is the product of over seventy-five years of incremental development. Prior to the publication of Gardner’s first edition in 1926, most illustrated art history surveys used in North American colleges and universities were actually English translations of European publications, typically written from a blatantly Eurocentric point of view. To the modern reader, books such as Salomon Reinach’s Apollo: An Illustrated Manual of the History of Art throughout the Ages and similar texts widely used during the early years of the twentieth century display a noticeably condescending bias against non-European cultures in general, whether American, East Asian, or those of indigenous peoples subject to European colonial rule. The world of art was for the authors of these books an exclusively white, male domain (Reinach’s sole mention of a woman artist is a single sentence devoted to Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun). Nonetheless, examination of the coverage provided by these books offers revealing insights regarding the early growth of art history as a discipline torn between the adherents of stylistic analysis (the formalists) on the one hand, and cultural analysis (the contextualists) on the other. It also suggests that the original edition of Gardner’s addressed a critical need for a publication written from an American generalist point of view—one that, moreover, reflected what was for its time a refreshingly inclusive, multi-cultural appreciation of world art.

The first edition of what is now titled Gardner’s Art Through the Ages certainly broke new ground. Priced at $4.00, only slightly above the average for illustrated trade books at the time, it presented some 650 examples of world art in 478 compact (20 x 13cm.) pages, while weighing less than two pounds. Although some of its nomenclature now sounds quaint (“Mohammedan” for Islamic, “Primitive” for most dark-skinned indigenous peoples), it not only acknowledged the existence of non-European cultures, but treated them respectfully. An educator in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago rather than a university research specialist, Helen Gardner promoted an expansive definition of art by including numerous examples of what were then known as the “minor” or “decorative arts,” such as furniture, glass, jewelry, and ceramics. Interestingly, her ability as a generalist to think inclusively about a broad range of art ran counter to the increasing tendency towards specialization among the
members of the academic community who used her book in their courses. After her death, Gardner's welcoming attitude towards the decorative arts, along with her efforts to interrelate European and world art, was decisively rejected by Professor Sumner Crosby and a team of style period specialists from Yale University, who assumed authorship of the fourth edition.

In other ways, Gardner's original publication more closely resembled its predecessors. Visual content was clearly subordinate to textual content. By today's standards its illustrations were miniscule (some barely "thumbnail" sized), and must have been useful primarily for recognizing broader aspects of composition, rather than for studying detail. The 651 black-and-white photographs were bound separately from the text pages as 176 plates, with as many as five works illustrated per plate. Many works discussed in the text were not illustrated at all; perhaps photographs were not available at the time. Coverage leaned heavily towards works in major European museums, as these institutions were among the early pioneers in using photographs to promote public awareness of their collections. Consequently, much of the book assumed the character of a traditional Grand Tour.

Gardner's first edition also exemplified the linear-progressive outlook typical of its day, which ascribed value to the different historical style periods according to their influence on subsequent art, particularly in nineteenth-century academic art. Coverage inclined towards a "leaping and lingering" focus on selected periods of presumably outstanding accomplishment. Within this schema, ancient Egypt was regarded as far more significant than Mesopotamia, not only presented first as the earliest of the great ancient civilizations, but also enjoying a nearly 3:1 ratio in number of pages (forty-one vs. sixteen) and a nearly 4:1 ratio in number of works discussed (sixty-eight to nineteen). The Greeks were presented in forty-eight pages (seventy-three works) as outstanding original creators; while the Romans (sixteen pages, thirty-nine works) were characterized mostly as imitators, albeit inventively practical engineers. The Dark Ages were inconsequential; the Romanesque (sixteen pages, nineteen works) was primarily important as a stepping-stone to the great era of the High Gothic cathedrals (twenty-five pages, thirty-two works), which alone made medieval art worthy of study. The Italian Renaissance marked a high-water mark of human intellectual and artistic achievement, attested by the inclusion of seventy-four works; in contrast, Italian Mannerism was completely ignored, and the Italian Baroque dismissed as the degenerate consequence of corruption in religious institutions, worthy of only a scant six pages of coverage (which included no mention of Bernini, and no illustrations of works by Caravaggio). Although Gardner's first edition appeared when a quarter of the twentieth century had passed, and more than a decade after the Armory Show of 1913 had brought the European avant-garde to widespread public notice, the author avoided addressing contemporary art other than speculatively, and concluded her coverage of modernism with Cézanne.

In contrast, the most recent (eleventh) edition of Gardner's, as is similarly true of the other major survey textbooks, gives nearly equal coverage to Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern art, while giving the latter credit for being the older culture. Discussion of Roman civilization is more nearly on a par with that of Greece, as is likewise true for the relationship of Romanesque to Gothic. Mannerism and the Italian Baroque are presented as valid aesthetic responses to the intellectual environments of their times, not merely as debased offspring of the High Renaissance. Most significantly, all of the survey textbooks strive continually to update their coverage of contemporary art movements and personalities. In fact, this quest for currency is a major factor driving the frequent appearance of new editions: the interval has shrunk from the original ten to twelve year publishing cycle to as little as three years between editions for some titles. (One might reasonably ask whether the canon, if it does indeed constitute the essential core of each textbook, is that mutable.) Recent works of significant interest, such as Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (1982) and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (1993-97), now routinely appear in subsequent editions; the inclusion of a work in one book increases the likelihood that its competitors must add it as well. Thus even relatively new works can seem to attain canonical status, without always meeting the traditional criteria of having "stood the test of time" or influencing successive generations of artists.

This practice also suggests that, as each new edition in preparation looks over its shoulder at what the competition is including, there is a danger that the art history textbooks as a group have become self-referential. While promoting the canonicity of certain types of world art, their choices do not always concur with other qualitative assessments. For instance, there is relatively little congruency between the textbooks' selections of recognized architectural monuments and examples of the built environment included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list.4

Comparison of the works included by the various textbooks considered in this study, along with tabulation of the contents of their earlier editions, suggests that the concept of a canon they present is far from constant; it is in fact highly mutable. No single textbook covers more than a portion of the world's great artistic works and architectural monuments; at the same time, despite considerable overlap, there are also significant differences in coverage among the various books contending for market share, and even between different editions of the same title. Not every work found in each survey textbook can be fairly called canonical, and some typically will have been included for extrinsic reasons. Exact percentages are difficult to quantify because of dissimilar ways in which the textbooks define what constitutes a "work," as will be further detailed. Nonetheless, my tabulations suggest that:
Only about 20 percent of the works covered in a typical textbook truly qualify as "consensus canonical works" on which all four of the books with major market share uniformly agree.

A further 30-40 percent of works could be described as "convergent key works," in that two or three (but not all) of the textbooks include them.

Still other works may be selected to represent the signature styles of significant artists, or as typical examples of stylistic movements, object types, or techniques; but here there is even less agreement. Every survey textbook, for instance, contains a Rembrandt self-portrait and a Cézanne still life, but each presents different examples.

At the opposite end of the scale from the "consensus canonical works," each textbook contains numerous examples of works that are unique to its authors' personal preferences, backgrounds, and areas of academic specialization; some of these choices, while introducing less familiar material to broader public awareness, may also be quite subjective, and at times even idiosyncratic.

Among the two hundred or so consensus canonical works—those included in all of the most recent editions of the "big four" textbooks—only a small fraction of pre-twentieth-century examples have appeared consistently throughout the eleven editions of Gardner's. Hundreds of works have come and gone (sometimes both) from the pages of Gardner's over the span of seventy-five years. A similar fluidity characterizes the coverage of the other survey textbooks over time. Many works now regarded as canonical have appeared incrementally. Some of these have been recent creations: Gardner's second edition (1936) added Grant Wood's American Gothic (1930), Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House (1907-09), and Walter Gropius' Bauhaus campus (1925-26); the third edition (1948) introduced Wright's Fallingwater (1935-37) and Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (1912). Picasso's Guernica only gained entry in the fourth edition, more than two decades after its controversial debut at the 1937 Paris International Exposition. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907), long regarded as a watershed work in both Picasso's career and the Cubist movement, did not appear until the fifth edition (1970), and then only after its inclusion in the first edition of competitor Janson's History of Art (1962) had forced the issue.

Other additions to the canon represent "new" discoveries of ancient works. Treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamun (discovered 1923) and objects from Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur (first exhibited in 1928) initially appeared in Gardner's second edition. The cave paintings of Lascaux took nearly twenty years to find their way into the fourth edition (1959), as did the Indus Valley finds from Mohenjo-daro (which then disappeared from the fifth edition, only to reappear in the sixth). The Anglo-Saxon treasures from Sutton Hoo (discovered in 1939) and the Neolithic settlement at Catal Huyuk (excavated 1961) appeared in Janson before being admitted to Gardner's (fifth edition).

More recent archaeological discoveries have had an easier time making their way onto survey pages, thanks in part to the accelerated pace of official publication, but also to widespread coverage by the news media: the clay armies of Emperor Qin Shi-huangdi (excavated in 1977) and the Paleolithic murals of Chauvet cave (discovered in 1994, and shortly thereafter "pre-published" on the Internet) both appeared in the next major textbook editions published, and have since been widely adopted by their competitors as well.

Tracing reasons for the inclusion, or exclusion, of other works equally accessible to the public is more difficult. Sometimes selections have been guided by critical reassessment of artists and works, or their inclusion in major exhibitions. The biases of textbook authors and chapter contributors can also at times be quite pronounced. As was widely true of her time, Helen Gardner believed strongly in the ameliorative quality of art to improve mankind and impart aesthetic pleasure; she apparently was far less comfortable with the power of art to confront the viewer, shock the public, or challenge the accepted order. The first three editions of Art Through the Ages prepared under her direction seem to have chosen deliberately to avoid works dealing with problematic themes such as sexuality, violence, immoral or anti-social behavior, abnormal mental states, and political radicalism. The modern reader will look in vain through her three editions for such now-familiar standards as Goya's Executions of the Third of May, Munch's The Scream, or Delacroix' Liberty Leading the People. Gardner's selective criteria evidently outlived her; only after their appearances in Janson did such popular works as Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, Bronzino's Allegory of Lust, Fragonard's The Swing, and Daumier's Rue Transnonain gain admission to the following edition of Gardner's. The same was true of Correggio's erotic Jupiter and Io, which, ironically, would eventually appear as the cover art for Gardner's tenth edition (1996).

Changes in the canon may also be forced by currents outside the realm of art. New generations of professors, and the students they taught, responded to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the women's liberation movement of the 1970s by demanding admission for minority and women artists into what had been almost exclusively a white male pantheon. In 1980, Gardner's seventh edition introduced Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofemes, using it as a point of departure for a disappointingly brief discussion of women artists in general. Mary Garrard observed in her biography of the painter that early feminist critics and scholars had often championed Artemisia as the victim of unjustifiable neglect, focusing as much on the account of her rape, trial, and torture as on the content and quality of her work. Judith quickly gained canonical status in the survey textbooks, although among the current editions only Adams actually mentions any of the biographical details that had made Artemisia an exemplar for
generations of oppressed women artists.

The reasons why certain formerly popular works have disappeared altogether can be even more elusive. As works and artists are subjected to ongoing critical scrutiny, some once highly regarded may in time fall from favor. More often, the addition of new works inevitably results in the deletion of a certain number of other works found in previous editions. At times, the reason simply comes down to a matter of available space: with authors and publishers striving to provide increasingly broad coverage in order to remain competitive and up-to-date, and even with page counts growing constantly, textbooks must limit the number of works they include by each artist. Most instructors presenting Manet to a class, for instance, would want to show students both his Olympia and Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe as milestones of his career; most recent textbook editions end up choosing one or the other, but not both.

Events in the wider world can also have a negative impact on coverage. Responding to popular interest in Latin America following World War II, Helen Gardner’s third edition added several chapters on Post-Conquest Hispanic culture (including “Renaissance Art in the Americas,” “Latin American Painting and Folk Arts,” and “Twentieth-Century Mexican Painting”). In 1959, Gardner’s fourth edition eliminated much of this material and trimmed the remaining sections from forty-three to fourteen pages, perhaps reflecting not only the Sumner Crosby group’s renewed focus on the European mainstream, but also widespread public disenchantment with our “neighbors to the south” following the hostile reception given Vice-President Richard Nixon during his 1958 South American tour and the recent accession to power of Fidel Castro’s revolutionary movement in Cuba. Unfortunately, considering the numbers of Hispanic-heritage students in American higher education today, the most recent edition of Gardner’s devotes a scant three pages to twentieth-century Latin American art (with one detail each from mural programs by Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera). A single painting by Frida Kahlo (The Two Fridas, 1939) is included elsewhere among European Dada and Surrealist works, thereby distancing the artist from both her husband and her heritage.

The economics of publication can also have an enormous impact on coverage. One of the largest factors driving double-digit increases in art history textbook prices is the high cost of securing photographs and reproduction rights (which for one recent edition reportedly exceeded two million dollars). Sometimes compromises are necessary: a work may be included, not because it is the best possible example, but because photographs and reproduction rights are readily available, at the right price.
The typical comprehensive art history survey textbook contains over 1,500 illustrations, documenting more than one thousand works. Precise numbers are difficult to determine because a work may be documented, or even defined, in different ways by different publications. While most works are usually represented by a single illustration, with occasionally a detail provided as well, architectural monuments may require three or more illustrations (e.g., an elevation photograph of the principal façade, an interior view, and a plan or sectional drawing), each of which is given a separate figure number.

Serial works and illuminated manuscripts present another problem: defining whether the work consists of the larger named entity or the individual page or illumination. In it. Print folios such as Goya’s Los Caprichos and Disasters of War are typically included, but are represented by different selected plates. The same is true of medieval manuscripts, such as the Vienna Genesis, the Book of Kells, the Utrecht Psalter, and the Limbourg Brothers’ Tres Riches Heures de Jean, Duc du Berry. All of the full-year survey textbooks, and several of the single semester books as well, include these codices, but present them in very different ways because each book chooses a different page or illumination detail to illustrate, and uses its related text passages primarily to describe specific stylistic features of the selected page or detail. Programmatic works such as the portals of Moissac and the stained glass of Chartres Cathedral may be represented by a single illustration, or by a half dozen, and the arrangement of these over several pages may either clarify or confuse the relationship of each part to the larger whole.

Attempts to represent complex projects such as polypych altarpieces and fresco programs further complicate perceptions of what comprises a work. The isolation of portions such as the “Lamentation” from Giotto’s Arena Chapel fresco cycle or the “Betrayal of Christ” from Duccio’s Maesta Altarpiece as independent “works,” without clearly showing their contexts, may actually confuse students about the compositional intentions of the artists. An egregious case in point is the treatment given Grunewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece. The outer, or closed, position, containing the “Crucifixion,” may be shown with, or without, the left and right wings and predella. While some textbooks also illustrate the radiant middle, or open, position (Annunciation; Madonna and Child with Angelic Musicians; Resurrection), still others include only one of these panels; one book ignores the middle position entirely, to show instead the carved inner shrine with left and right painted panels. None of the textbooks, using only two or three illustrations, clearly conveys how this multi-part work gradually reveals its comforting message through a series of unfoldings, although this sequence is crucial to understanding the intended therapeutic function of the altarpiece in its original setting, a hospice for the critically ill.

The Parthenon and its elaborate program of architectural sculpture may be regarded as a single entity or as separate works, and may be represented in the textbooks by as many as thirteen illustrations (Adams), or as few as three or four (Gombrich, Honour & Fleming, Watkin). The Phidian sculptural program includes two pedimental groups comprised of individual figures carved in the round, a number of high relief metopes, and the low relief frieze. Although most of the sculptures are currently housed in the British Museum, significant fragments are also located in the Musée du Louvre and the Acropolis Museum, Athens (where they are, in fact, exhibited as independent works). Survey textbooks typically illustrate one or another of the metopes, and show, either wholly or in part, one of the equestrian slabs or the “Head of the Panathenaic Procession” from the frieze (only Gardner’s includes more than a single frieze fragment). Adams, Hartt, and Stokstad provide a photographic composite of surviving figures from the East Pediment; while Gardner’s, Honour and Fleming, Janson, and Wilkins and Schultz illustrate only selected individual figures.

Helen Gardner’s original inclusive attitude towards the decorative arts has long since disappeared. Other than the occasional Tiffany lamp or Rietveld chair, today’s textbooks offer students few opportunities to consider the functional object as a work of art. The cross-fertilization of “high art” and industrial design was the subject of one of Helen Gardner’s final chapters (“The Art of the Machine”) in the third edition, which used the tools and language of stylistic analysis to consider the interrelationship of form and function in works such as a Raymond Loewy locomotive, a Lockheed Constellation passenger airplane, and an advertising poster by Herbert Bayer. This forward-looking attempt to establish a dialogue between the museum environment and the wider world was, unfortunately, also terminated in the fourth edition by Crosby’s traditionalist group. In contrast, today’s survey textbooks reflect the narrower focus exemplified by Hartt’s title: art, by their definition, consists primarily of painting, sculpture, and architecture.

Throughout the first half of the last century, advocates ranging from Alfred Stieglitz to the Museum of Modern Art fought to establish the legitimacy of photography as an artistic medium. Despite their best efforts, most textbooks have been slow to consider photographs equally as works of art. Because even those textbooks that do include photography tend to concentrate on Victorian-era and early twentieth century examples, survey course instructors must seek out additional resources to avoid giving students the impression that photography remains a technically static, monochromatic medium.

The twentieth century has been called the “century of the moving image.” Contemporary students’ awareness of their visual environment has been shaped largely by film, television, and the Internet. Time-based media received an isolated, brief acknowledgement in a single spread of Gardner’s ninth edition (1991), which included one still from each of Sergei Eisenstein’s The Battleship Potemkin and Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will. Even this truncated treat-
ment was dropped in the tenth edition; none of Gardner’s competitors has responded to the challenge either. Ironically, although page layout design in the latest generation of survey textbooks has clearly been influenced by website design—evidenced by the frequent use of devices such as highlighted headings, text blocks with shaded backgrounds, and hypertext-style breakout panels—the content of these publications ignores the dominant visual culture instead of engaging it in a meaningful way.

In a series of perceptive reviews appearing in Art Journal more than a decade ago,7 methodologist Bradford R. Collins identified a number of fundamental problems with the very concept of the comprehensive art history survey textbook as it had then evolved: these included disparity between coverage of Western and non-Western cultures; the avoidance of study-in-depth in favor of an often superficial breadth of coverage; and reluctance to include artists and works that failed to fit comfortably within a schema of logical, orderly style period classification and development. Today, even after the revolutionary transformation of the information environment wrought by the Internet, survey textbooks still appear wedded to the goal of creating a printed simulacrum for the “ideal museum,” hosting a series of blockbuster style period exhibitions of the greatest works from collections around the world. At the same time, art historians increasingly challenge not only the practical aspects but the moral dimensions of traditional fealty to the canon:

The survey’s traditional concentration on the art of the West now derives mostly from a set of rigid assumptions about what must be understood, in the end, as a claim for a natural canon of Western artistic and moral superiority. . . . As presently conceived, the art history survey itself is a bar to efforts to formulate a common problematic of culture. In the end I think we need to recognize that the canon is not a yardstick for determining enduring timeless masterpieces, but an agent of power, the power to decide whose culture and whose views will set agendas for the rest of us.8

From the time Gardner’s first edition was published in 1926 through the burgeoning of higher education in the years immediately following the Second World War, the art history survey textbook was used principally as a stand-alone resource. Most larger universities also provided their professors with extensive mounted picture files and collections of lantern slides. These latter were large and of high resolution, albeit generally monochromatic; but they were also heavy, fragile, and inflexible, generally having to be purchased from professional photographers. Smaller schools often relied on the textbook alone, mediated by the instructor’s chalkboard lectures.

The pedagogy of art history began to change dramatically during the 1950s. Acceptance of the 35mm color slide as a universal format encouraged many major museums to offer slides of works in their collections for sale at reasonable prices. Commercial vendors also began to offer high quality color slides to the educational market, including “comprehensive” starter sets of the most popular works, often keyed to survey textbook contents. At the same time, advances in printing technology made art books with accurate color reproductions more widely available, at prices most libraries could afford.

The convergence of these factors allowed institutions to develop their visual resources collections in-house by using copy stand photography, a practice that both underscored the power of the art history survey textbook to shape perceptions of the canon (especially when curators photographed all the illustrations in a given edition to add to their collections), and at the same time encouraged instructors to move beyond its limits, since alternatives and supplemental examples were now so readily available.

This pedagogical technology that evolved during the 1950s remained remarkably stable into the 1990s, despite tumultuous changes in art historical methodology, scholarship, and course content. From the mid-1990s onward, the expansive growth of Web-based resources has offered the opportunity to re-examine methods of instruction, including the centrality of the printed textbook. To date, publishers have continued issuing traditional survey books as primary course resources, treating Web-delivered content as ancillary rather than integral. This stance, while protecting their vested interests, may well limit the potential of both printed and electronic publications. The question is fairly asked, whether they should stay this tightly-structured presentational course, so clearly rooted in the linearity of traditional text, or whether the next generation of books should acknowledge that the ground rules have changed, and morph into something approaching a resource portfolio of images and information.

Vignette 3: At some time in the not-so-distant future, the innovative instructor and her freshman class together explore the next generation of the art history textbook, now a richly-illustrated printed companion to a comprehensive Web-based resource, rather than the stand-alone package of the past. Linear text has largely disappeared as a major component: rather than her lectures rehashing the textbook narrative, the instructor’s distinctive course organization and methodology determine the sequence in which works are presented. Illustrations are accompanied by expanded captions (a technique widely used by publications such as National Geographic, which feature high-quality photography). Important background information is arranged in bullet-point summary tables and comparative lists, which the reader/viewer may flexibly navigate. Most crucially, Web-delivered resources have become equal partners to the printed content, rather than mere ancillaries, providing extensive image arrays that expand upon principal themes. The class can actually trace the typological development of Archaic Greek
kouroi through viewing a dozen examples, and elucidate for themselves an assessment of stylistic transformation rather than simply reading a summary of it. The instructor can select a number of examples of Rembrandt’s self-portraits to articulate biographical information. As previously she enhanced her lectures with comparisons drawn from her departmental slide collection, she now navigates freely outside the linear chronological sequence to demonstrate how the pose of Michelangelo’s Prophet Isaiah from the Sistine Chapel frescoes was adapted by Norman Rockwell for his “Rosie the Riveter,” how familiarity with Leonardo’s Mona Lisa enhances the irony of Dean Rohrer’s “Mona Lewinsky/Monica Lisa” cover for the New Yorker; or how Titian’s Bacchus and Ariadne meets the world of rock head-on in the cover art for the Crash Test Dummies’ album “God Shuffled His Feet.” Strategic use of Web-streaming images and quick-time movie clips allows her to show free-standing sculptures such as Myron’s Discobolos or Bernini’s David in 360-degree revolve; present dynamic “walk-through” virtual visits to architectural spaces; clarify the interrelationship of the various sections of the Isenheim Altarpiece; or actually let the Odessa Steps montage sequence from The Battleship Potemkin convey its mounting tension, or the Nazi spectacles in Triumph of the Will exert their ominous cumulative force.

In such a teaching environment, the power of art as a visual experience would be conveyed visually—rather than textually—to a student population that is already, in many ways, post-literate. Freed from the responsibility of having to carry the full weight of summarizing an artist’s career, or even an entire movement, each canonical creation could be more fairly understood, and appreciated, as a distinctive individual response to the problems and possibilities of its time: an expression of shared humanity, firmly grounded in its own historical context, yet at the same time capable of interacting freely with contemporary visual culture in all of its boisterous vibrancy.

Notes

1 This title, hence, is still popularly known as “Gardner’s,” although the author died in 1948, and was directly responsible only for the first three editions. These are referenced in this article by the non-italicized form of the author’s name. Following her death, the publisher decided to retain her name, and certain aspects of her global outlook, as significant aspects of the book’s identity; the fourth and subsequent editions were therefore retitled Gardner’s Art Through the Ages, and will be referenced by the italicized form of the original author’s name.

2 See full bibliography for recent art history survey textbooks considered in this study, which also included all previous editions of each title.


4 <http://www.themailons.org/lynn/world.legacy.html>.


Illustrations

Fig. 1. (L) Helen Gardner’s original Art Through the Ages, 1926. It presented 650 works of art in 478 pages, weighed less than two pounds, and was priced at $4.00. (R) Gardner’s Art Through the Ages, 11th edition, 2001. Its 1,198 pages feature over 1,400 illustrations; it weighs nearly eleven pounds and is priced at $100.00

Fig. 2. Textbook illustrations and layout. (L) Plate 101 from Gardner’s Art Through the Ages, 1926, showing (at lower right) a small [1-1/2 x 2-1/2"] photograph of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescoes. The brief caption does not identify the artist. The book’s 176 plates, each illustrating as many as five works, were printed and bound separately from the text pages. Generous margins meant that the photographs and captions occupied only two-thirds of available page space. (R) Sample page from Adams’ Art Across Time, 2nd edition, 2002, showing full-page illustration with extended caption. Larger page size [8-1/2” x 11"] and tighter margins allow the publisher to present a color photograph of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescoes that is nearly twenty times the size of the example from Gardner’s first edition.

Recent Art History Text Book Editions


Older Historical Survey Book Titles
(referenced for general comparative purposes only)


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New Lamps for Old: Looking Back at Lantern Slide Projection

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Introduction

The hall is filled with people waiting in anticipation for the show to begin. In the center of the hall, placed on a pedestal draped in red velvet, is a large biunial stereopticon projector, a magic lantern made of brass and mahogany. The stage is set. A pianist in a green Victorian dress sits stately at a grand piano on the stage to the left of the audience. The music begins as the “professor,” wearing a top hat and tails, walks on stage twirling his cane amidst a rousing ovation. He will not be on the stage for long though. After a bow and a few words he steps off the stage and approaches the circle of the magic lantern. Our “professor” is a combination showman and narrator, but most of all he is a lanternist. He rests his cane, takes off his coat and hat, strikes a match and carefully proceeds to light the limelight burner. A slide image appears on the 25-foot wide screen. The audience applauds again. After a few advertisements for clothing and shoes, the lanternist, accompanied by music and a series of brightly illuminated slides, narrates the story of The Little Match Girl by Hans Christian Andersen.¹

Before the development of the cinematographe by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895, the magic lantern, in various forms since the seventeenth century, had served as the major image projection device for illusionist entertainment.² By the dawn of the twentieth century it was no longer in the “limelight” and the magic lantern became simply known as a lantern projector.³ However, its usefulness was not lost on educators who realized that slide projection could be beneficial for viewing images associated with their pedagogy. During the latter part of the nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth century, lantern slides were produced in abundance by commercial purveyors as well as by independent photographers, scholars, scientists, and academics in various disciplines of study. Lantern slides were used to document art, architecture, and ancient artifacts. Aerial views of archaeological sites were photographed from balloons and processed as lantern slides for the study of archaeology. Lantern slides were used in the natural sciences. Solar astrophysical observatories produced lantern slides for the study of astronomy. Some of these slides are still being projected today, but many of them have been relegated to obsolescence where they are either de-accessioned or forgotten. On occasion they are rediscovered to the joy and delight of a younger generation of visual resources curators who marvel at their beauty. As lantern slides cease to be used for their iconic image value, they begin to be perceived differently. Looking back from the beginning of the twenty-first century at these marvelous objects, we see them for what they have become: artifacts of a time gone by.