On April 9-10, 1999, the Clark Art Institute convened its first annual Clark Conference, a new international forum "for the discussion of issues raised by the study, presentation, and explanation of art, whether in universities or museums, exhibitions or books." "The Two Art Histories" was organized by Charles Haxthausen, director of the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art. His goal was not to spark a predictable debate between museum-based connoisseurship and aestheticism versus university-based critical theory and revisionist scholarship, but rather to explore the underlying institutional factors that help these extremes to exist, where and how the two art histories might favorably intersect, and whether comparable issues are at play across the national borders of the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States.

The conference was thus organized in three sessions. The first session, "Perspectives," presented six speakers, a museum scholar paired with a university scholar from each of the three countries, who offered their impressions of the state of the discipline in each respective country. The second, "The Exhibition as Discursive Medium," included five scholars who discussed the temporary exhibition in general as a medium to present art historical narratives. The third, "Impressionism: the Blockbuster and Revisionist Scholarship," involved five speakers who focused more narrowly on the Impressionist blockbuster as a medium where the two art histories might intersect most fruitfully, given the never-ending public appetite for the art, and the fact that Impressionism has also spawned so much revisionist scholarship in recent years. To conclude, a panel of four art historians noted for their work across the discipline responded to the earlier sessions. With the nearly 200 attendees participating fully, there was an additional, but informal, ongoing session that interjected the critical added elements of education and audience.

The Two Art Histories: Perspectives

Stephen Deuchar, director of the Tate Gallery of British Art, in terms very familiar to an American audience, described recent challenges to museum practice in Britain. He spoke of the lack of public funding for the arts, commercially-driven exhibition practices, the intrusion of the "new art history" and the resulting political confrontations between the museum and the academy. Dawn Ades from the University of Essex then described her approach to the exhibition Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980 from her position as an academic art historian whose scholarship is often made manifest in museum galleries. The German perspective came from Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, director of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, who explained that the issues between the museum and academy in Germany are similar, but perhaps not as contentious. Ebert-Schifferer stressed interpretation as the primary issue, not so much within the discipline, but between both the museum and the academy and their audience. Andreas Beyer, a professor at the University of Aachen, spoke about the importance of installation practice, and the importance of documenting the installation by translating the visual experience into the verbal language of the accompanying catalog. Ivan Gaskell, Margaret S. Winthrop Curator at the Fogg Art Museum, explored the institutional factors which not only distinguish American scholars working in the university from those working in museums, but which inextricably place each within a complex international art world of dealers, collectors, curators, conservators, academics, and editors. The session’s final speaker was Barbara Stafford, professor of art history at the University of Chicago. Her paper was an appeal for museum and university scholars to collaboratively grapple with the blurring visual diet offered up by new visual technologies which, through their dismal failure to communicate genre, leave the population ill prepared to encounter works of art.

The Exhibition as Discursive Medium

Independent scholar Richard Kendall opened this second session with a talk about the installation decisions made in his 1996 exhibition Degas: Beyond Impressionism. For example, he argued that only by placing sculptures at the same height as pictures could the viewer test Kendall’s notion that Degas was using his own sculpture as models for his paintings. Mark Rosenthal, curator of twentieth-century art at the Guggenheim Museum, also spoke of juxtapositions and installation practices as essential tools for suggesting context, warning that in thematically-driven, highly discursive exhibitions, the curator’s position often overrides the artist’s. Interjecting the concept of audience, Pat Mainardi, City University of New York, stressed that even in the juxtapositions of works in an exhibition, a tale is being told, one that is often simply a reiteration of the modernist morality tale, intended to appeal to, but not challenge, audiences. Mainardi pointed out that university scholars have long debunked the modernist myths, but that for museum scholars to convey this debunking would result in unpopular inclusions and exclusions on the walls in exhibitions.
The next speaker, Eckhart Gillen from the Museumspädagogischer Dienst in Berlin, related his mounting of the historical 1997 exhibition Deutschlandsbilder, and his attempt to visually place post-war German art within the historical context of the nation of the same period. William Treuttner of the National Museum of American Art then elaborated on the difference between “active” and “passive” engagement with audiences, referring to his 1991 exhibition The West as America as “active” in that the wall texts served as a corrective to the heroic vision of America’s westward expansion. A “passive” approach to the same works of art would have featured aesthetics over history.

Both Mark Rosenthal and William Treuttner referred to the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, who in a review of the Anselm Kiefer watercolor show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote: “Wall texts are a bane of late 20th-century museology … We can’t help but read them, and thus are jarred from silent reverence into nattering pedagogy.” As it would appear from the discussion that followed the presentation of the five papers in this session, there are museum and university scholars on both sides of this statement, some of whom felt that thematic exhibitions, in particular, require some accompanying text. But it is also helpful to be reminded, as we were by Pat Mainardi, that even in the exclusion or inclusion of particular works of art, a narrative is being told.

Impressionism: the Blockbuster and Revisionist Scholarship

In his introduction to the second day of the conference, Richard Rand, curator of paintings at the Clark Art Institute, stated that the many, but also varied, Impressionist exhibitions have offered “an unprecedented opportunity to study these artists in ways hardly possible outside the arena of the museum exhibition.” Perhaps in an effort to construct a way of talking about the numerous shows, the first speaker, Richard Brettell, from the University of Texas at Dallas, spoke about monographic retrospective shows as a means of reappraising the work of an artist as a whole, as opposed to shows that focus on geographically or temporarily bound segments of an artist’s work. He argued that both are valuable, but that in capitalizing on the fundability of Impressionist shows, organizers often make the wrong choice. For example, either they mount the retrospective when the entire body of work is already well known, whereas a more focused show would make a real contribution to scholarship, or they mount too many focused shows when a reappraisal of an artist’s complete work is still lacking.

John House, from the Courtauld Institute of Art, spoke next and immediately stated that monographic shows cannot be revisionist in any sense. He then defined three types of revisionism: 1) that which rejects all hierarchies of value and presents a range of types of art, 2) another that reverses modernist values in either moral or aesthetic terms, 3) and a third, which he advocates, that recognizes alternative and coexisting value systems. This type of revisionism, according to House, “insists that all aesthetic judgment is necessarily historically grounded.” He then spoke of his 1995 landscape exhibition, Impressions of France, as an example of this type of revisionist show, which tracked three distinct political and art historical phases in France from 1860 to 1890.

Griselda Pollock, from the University of Leeds, presented a paper which stressed that while many revisionist challenges are being accommodated by both universities and museums, feminist challenges are still “ruthlessly excluded.” Using Mary Cassatt as an example, she presented a virtual, imaginary exhibition whose thematic arrangement was based on, first, intellectualism, feminine and modernist poetics; second, the modernist woman’s struggle with sexuality and its representation; third, the defining moment of modernism, and finally, a look at the paintings which Cassatt as agent caused others to buy and are what we think of when we consider Impressionism. Michael Zimmerman, assistant director of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, then delivered a paper that traced the early collecting of French Impressionism in Germany through a close collaboration of dealers, critics, and museum directors. He also traced its reception through the Nazi government’s suppression of any modern art to its more recent treatment, pointing out that while blockbuster shows have been staged, the relationship remains uneasy and revisionist scholarship is marginal.

The final speaker in this session was Gary Tinterow from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who detailed his approach to the 1994 exhibition Origins of Impressionism as an empirical exercise. The curatorial team wanted to document the birth of this new style of painting, but the conclusions were not evident when they undertook the task. In setting the empirical stage, they cast a wide net, examining a wide range of topics from “today’s eclectic variety of perspectives.” Tinterow then reflected on the overwhelming popularity of the exhibition in terms of the viewing public, invoking the language of Stephen Greenblatt, as he remarked that “while the public wishes to learn and appreciate ‘resonance,’ they will only wait in line for ‘wonder.’”

Concluding Discussion

Michael Conforti, director of the Clark Art Institute, opened the concluding discussion with a summary of the many issues raised and introduced the notion that while museums may, like the Clark, have a goal to “embrace the challenge of relating scholarship to public understanding,” the opportunity may not yet be here. He then wondered whether the university audience might be expanded to include a more critical public, which may in turn affect museum practice and make the goal more attainable. Conforti then moderated a panel discussion by four art historians, including Malcolm Baker from the Victoria and Albert Museum, James Cuno from Harvard University Art Museums, Robert Rosenblum from New York University and the Guggenheim Museum, and Monika Wagner from the University of Hamburg, who offered concluding remarks and insights.

Malcolm Baker noted the progress made in the nature of the dialogue between university and museum scholars in the last decade. He also suggested that the dialogue needs to be expanded beyond the medium of the temporary exhibition to include the permanent collections of museums, and beyond the exhibition catalog to include other museum publications such as the catalog of the permanent collection. James Cuno, like Gary Tinterow, invoked Stephen Greenblatt’s “wonder” and “resonance,” by way of concluding that museums need first and foremost to ensure, because only the museum can, that the viewing public experiences “wonder” when they encounter a work of art. Though he was not the first to raise the issue, Robert Rosenblum spoke of the pragmatism of museum scholarship and made a particular plea for curators to continue to write detailed catalog entries, a practice
which pragmatism often precludes. Finally, Monika Wagner returned to the question of audience, stressing that museum scholars need to be as responsible as university scholars in stating up front why they are mounting a particular exhibition, why it is important, and what original contribution it is making. In addition, she pointed out that current exhibition practice needs to experiment more with what she termed “interpictuality,” by working with media and methods and their interrelations in art history, in order to move forward in a new visual era.

At the end of the conference, I was encouraged to hear that the debate between “The Two Art Histories,” while at times still contentious, had moved into a moment in which collaborations were being undertaken, museums were anxious to adopt new exhibition practices, and university and museum scholars alike were grappling with the visual possibilities afforded by, and confounded by, new technologies. It is unfortunate not to be able to recount the numerous contributions made by the conference attendees, and I regret that in condensing the large numbers of presentations I have of necessity made many omissions. I can only hope that I have not misrepresented any of the individuals. I can happily report that these proceedings are intended to be published in the near future. The second annual Clark Conference, organized by John Onians from the University of East Anglia, who serves also as consultative chair of the visiting scholars program at the Clark Art Institute. “Compression vs. Expression: Containing the World’s Art,” took place April 6-8, 2000, and addressed the “issues raised when the art of several areas of the world is brought together, as in a museum, a university course, a book, a theory, a library, or a database.”