

CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

“A Meeting Ground for Teachers and Scholars from All Over the World”

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the creation of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), a research institute within the Gallery that fosters study of the production, use, and cultural meaning of art, artifacts, and architecture through fellowships, research, publications, and colloquies.

The Center came into being in 1979, at the opening of the East Building. However, planning for the Center had begun many years earlier, in 1967, when the Gallery’s Board of Trustees accepted gifts from Paul Mellon and Ailsa Mellon Bruce that made the East Building possible. In authorizing the building, the United States Congress cited the hopes of the Gallery’s trustees that CASVA would “serve as a meeting ground for teachers and scholars from all over the world.”

From the beginning, the vision for the Center was, in the words of J. Carter Brown, the National Gallery’s deputy director at the time of CASVA’s inception, to make it possible “for scholars at a variety of levels and from a variety of academic and museum backgrounds to pursue their own studies in the atmosphere of a company of scholars, working day to day in conjunction with great original works of art.” Over its thirty years, CASVA has hosted more than eight hundred fellows and professors from nearly fifty countries and has published more than fifty volumes in the series *Studies in the History of Art*.

CASVA Colloquies

Among the most innovative and exciting programs at CASVA in recent years have been colloquies dedicated to the examination of individual works of art and attended by curators, art historians, and conservation scientists. These have evolved with support from various sources, particularly Robert H. Smith, the Edmond J. Safra Philanthropic Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The colloquies are intended to facilitate discussion by experts across disciplines, but they are also directed toward an emerging international generation of curators and scholars, many of whom have limited access to the deep scientific knowledge and historical experience the National Gallery of Art and CASVA have to offer. At a time when discussion of the idea of “two art histories,” one practiced in museums, the other in university departments, is rife, the special relationship between CASVA and the National Gallery can help to establish a new foundation for more integrated scholarship.

The first colloquy of 2009 was led by Nancy Troy, professor of art history at the University of Southern California and the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor at the National Gallery of Art in the fall of 2008. In collaboration with National Gallery staff, Professor Troy presented twentieth-century paintings from the National Gallery of Art’s collection, including Piet Mondrian’s *Tableau No. iv; Lozenge Composition with Red, Gray, Blue, Yellow, and Black* (fig. 1), and works by László Moholy-Nagy, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko, each of which posed significant questions concerning condition, conservation, and display.

During the three-day colloquy, participating scholars explored various interpretations of the alterations, revisions, and repainting evident in these works, considered the aesthetic function of varnishes, and discussed the ethical and philosophical problems raised by the dissemination of information regarding condition and conservation history to the broader public, where it is often tied to notions of value.

The second colloquy was devoted to a very different issue. The National Gallery’s *The Old Musician* by Edouard Manet recently underwent more than two years of conservation, during which layers of discoloring varnish were painstakingly removed (see pages 11–13). The importance of this modern masterpiece is such that its reemergence after patient treatment in the conservation studio provided an opportunity for a thorough reevaluation of Manet’s work in the crucial decade of the 1860s. Because *The Old Musician*, as part of the Chester Dale Collection, does not travel outside the Gallery, it has not been seen in exhibitions in the company of other works by the artist. The generous loan of *Ragpicker* from the Norton Simon Museum (Pasadena, California) allowed an unprecedented comparison of these two masterpieces of Manet’s oeuvre in the CASVA colloquy.

This year’s Kress Professor, John House, the Walter H. Annenberg Professor at the Courtauld Institute, is currently working on a study of realism and French painting from c. 1840 to 1870 in which Manet features in a significant way. He served as a moderator of the three-day colloquy, during which the two dozen participants examined *The Old Musician* and *Ragpicker* as well

Fig. 1. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. IV; Lozenge Composition with Red, Gray, Blue, Yellow, and Black*, c. 1924/1925, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild

as other paintings and works on paper by Manet. Of particular interest were an etching (see page 4, fig. 4) and a delicate drawing in watercolor and graphite from the Rosenwald Collection (see page 4, fig. 3), both showing the figure that appears in *The Absinthe Drinker* (see page 3, fig. 2). According to Manet's friend, the art critic Antonin Proust, Manet himself described this figure as "a Parisian type, studied in Paris, while putting into its execution the technical naiveté that I recognized in Velázquez's painting." Its reappearance as a character in *The Old Musician* immediately raises two fundamental and vexing questions for understanding Manet's art: the unusual compositional strategies by which he constructed groups additively rather than through compositional studies—almost in the manner of Caravaggio—and the motivation behind his deployment of motifs and figures both from the art of the past and from his own work.

Colloquy participants, many of whom have paintings by Manet in their care, brought their varied experiences to the discussion of these questions. John House argued for Manet as an improviser who plunged headlong into execution in a totally modern approach to painting. Indeed, Manet's rare lithograph, *The Balloon* (fig. 2), suggests just such improvisation through its wild lines and compressed crowds in the most complex graphic composition in Manet's oeuvre.

Given the artist's habit of cutting up large compositions that did not meet his ambitions, it is extraordinary that *The Old Musician* remained intact in his studio until Manet's death. For some critics, the painting's survival had

to do not only with the complete success it represented in Manet's overcoming academicism but also with his achievement in making the art of the past his own in a profound, systematic, and radical way. From a technical point of view, as the cleaning now makes very evident, Manet also succeeded in finding in this large canvas an extraordinary balance between areas of finish and sketch, in the manner of what Théophile Thoré called Manet's "mad ébauches."

The group of emerging scholars and curators who participated in the meeting to discuss these and other fascinating aspects of Manet's work formed a new professional network over the three days, and everyone felt privileged to be in the close company of *The Old Musician*, unframed, light-filled, and as if just newly completed in the studio of its thirty-year-old revolutionary creator. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*

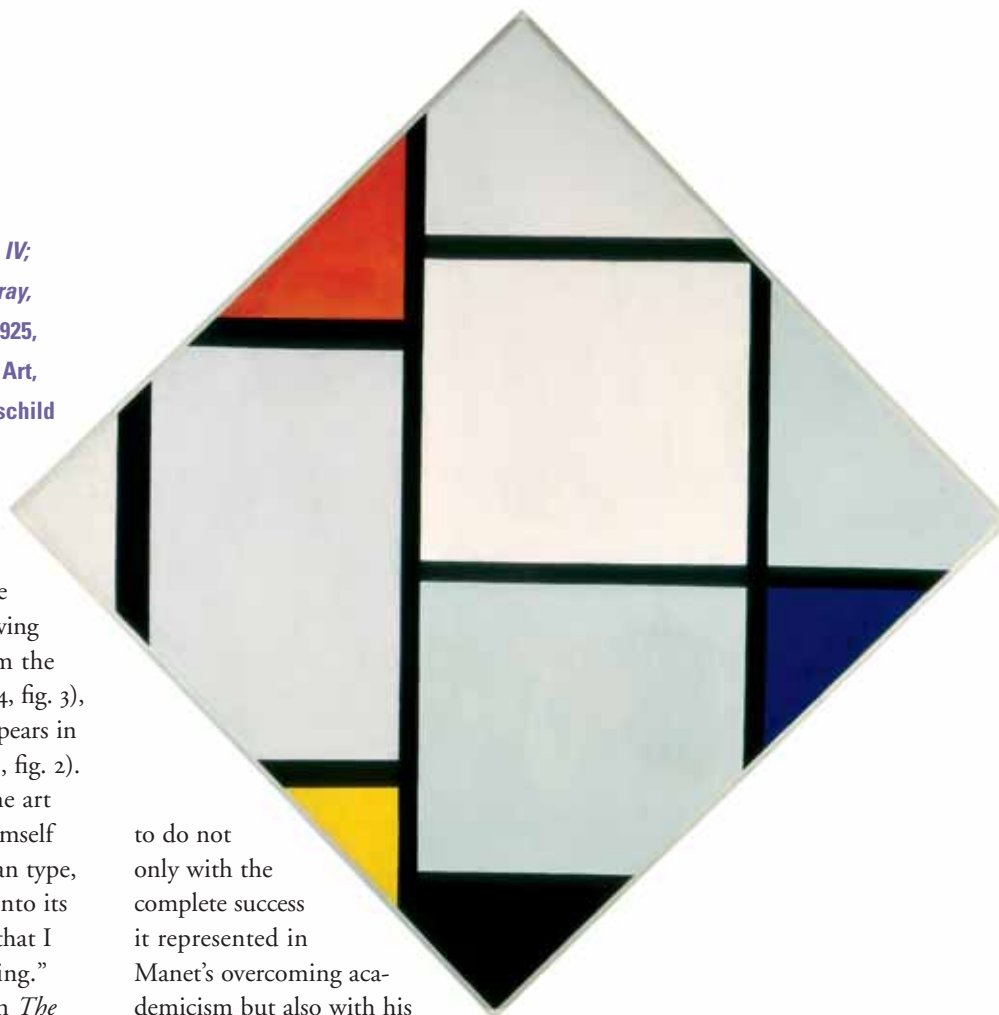


Fig. 2. Edouard Manet, *The Balloon*, 1862, lithograph in black on laid paper, state trial proof, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon