



CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

Looking Forward: Predoctoral Fellows at CASVA

The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts fellowship program has always been at the heart of the Center's mission. It has evolved with the National Gallery of Art itself, achieving international prominence with the construction of the East Building that provided for the library and space for the Center's activities. Opportunities for advanced research may be found in various centers throughout the world, but the highly competitive predoctoral fellowships at CASVA are unique. These provide support for outstanding scholars of the coming generation to conduct research for their dissertations, wherever in the world that takes them, and usually culminate in a period of residence as part of a larger community within the Gallery.

The vision of a research center at the Gallery dates to the early 1950s, a decade in which Paul Mellon and the Board of Trustees were deeply concerned with rebuilding the culture of peace. The inauguration of the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 1952 under the auspices of Paul and Mary Mellon's Bollingen Foundation was part of the same vision. Poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth wrote that Bollingen's purpose was "a steady drive toward reclaiming interiority, reinstating values that cannot be reduced to quantities; an adventure for significance, a quest for meaning...a part of the struggle for reevaluation and refounding of a collapsed Western civilization." Predoctoral fellowships were seen as crucial from the beginning. Supported by the Old Dominion and Avalon Foundations, the first predoctoral fellowships at the Gallery were established in 1959 in honor of David E. Finley, who wanted to encourage scholarly

careers in art museums. In 1964, a bequest from Chester Dale made it possible to establish several fellowships, at first in collaboration with the American Academy in Rome. That same year the Samuel H. Kress Foundation announced a grant for a senior scholar in residence (the Samuel H. Kress Professor) and two fellowships for graduate students. Fortunately that grant has been extended to the present day. In 1973, Robert H. and Clarice Smith established a fellowship for graduate students working in Northern European art.

The first David E. Finley fellows were Anthony M. "Baton" Clark and Sam Wagstaff, both legendary curators, collectors, and pioneers in their respective fields. Many others appointed in the early years, including Alan Shestack, Everett Fahy, Nancy Ward Neilson, and David Alan Brown, went on to become distinguished curators and scholars. The same holds true for the first decade of the Chester Dale, Kress, and Smith fellows, including such colleagues as Theodore E. Stebbins, Charles W. Talbot Jr., Ann B. Percy, and Gaillard Ravenel. The current predoctoral fellows, the most recent of some three hundred throughout the history of the program, will no doubt become leaders in their chosen fields in both academic and museum professions.

With the foundation of CASVA, the Trustees placed the existing fellowships within the Center. Since the first group of scholars in residence was welcomed in 1980, the predoctoral fellowship program has been broadened and deepened by the grant for a two-year Wyeth fellowship for American art and two two-year fellowships endowed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and

Ittleson Foundation for predoctoral students working outside the European and North American traditions. The latter have made it possible for CASVA both to fulfill more completely its original mission to study the art of the world and to provide an opportunity for some of the most exciting new research into the arts of Asia and Latin America as well as the cultures of Islam. The three-year Paul Mellon fellowship, created in 1987, supports the acquisition of deep expertise in the art and culture of a specific region in Europe.

CASVA's predoctoral fellowships provide the Center and the Gallery with a broad view of current developments in art history, as well as of future needs and possibilities. During the past decades the field has changed a good deal. Connoisseurship has been redefined as a means and not an end in itself; the social history of art and its relationship to other disciplines in the humanities have been given greater prominence. Even as the topography of the field has broadened, its chronology threatens to narrow, given the current enthusiasm for contemporary art on a global scale; and the potential exploitation of digital media has brought new challenges and opportunities. The debate over the so-called "two art histories" of academia and museums has devolved into a wider debate over shared problems of institutional support for research and the dissemination of knowledge to different publics. Attention has returned to the work of art itself through the renewed interest in materiality and manufacture, often discussed as "technical art history." CASVA's distinguished Board of Advisors is dedicated to recognizing these expanding interests and to

making fair and informed evaluations of nominees.

The history of art has not escaped the sense of crisis in the humanities, which is largely focused on declining support in higher education for subjects that are not based in science and engineering, and therefore not considered likely to lead to immediate employment. With the narrowing of educational opportunities in the arts, and in literature, languages, and history, comes a loss of a general and shared knowledge, of a civilized understanding of diversity, and of the enjoyment of creativity and aesthetic delight. We are reminded of that need to reclaim interiority and reinstate values that cannot be reduced to quantities that Kenneth Rexroth identified after World War II.

A recent report on the Ph.D. in art history issued as part of a Mellon Research Initiative at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York, gave a more positive view. While much work remains to be done to diversify the population of graduate students, the study of art history is more pluralistic in approach and subject matter than ever before. The report, to which this author contributed, identified several fundamental elements in graduate training that must be defended, including basic field research and the need to combine specific expertise with breadth of knowledge. Support for travel and language training is crucial, as is the acquisition of digital skills. The opportunity to develop curatorial experience and knowledge from an early point (and not just a later add-on) is essential for the future of museums, and for the strength and expansion of the field as a whole. Nothing can substitute for careful advice and constant, critical supervision.

In light of this report, CASVA's predoctoral fellowships are more important than ever. These fellowships support intense research, usually requiring travel to collections and archives (from

Tibet to Burkina Faso, from Cuzco to Moscow); frequent communication with the Center provides both criticism and continuity. The combination of fellows in widely differing fields together with the close interaction with senior members of the Center and Gallery staff encourages breadth of interest and demands clarity of expression. Daily life at the Gallery provides unique insight into its mission, particularly its dedication to serving the public at the highest level. And, most recently, the gift by Robert H. Smith for the acquisition of scholars' housing brought a genuine community into existence. The Center looks forward to the flourishing of its current and future predoctoral fellows as curators, professors, critics, and collectors in the decades ahead.

• Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*

Gustave de Beaucorps, *Spanish Steps, Rome*, c. 1858, waxed-paper negative, Gift of Robert and Paula Hershkowitz in memory of Sam Wagstaff



Pompeo Batoni, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, c. 1762, oil on canvas, Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle