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# CASVA

## Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

### American Old Masters: A New History of Art

The acquisition of the Corcoran Collection in 2014 transformed the Gallery's holdings of works by nineteenth-century American painters from exceptional to extraordinary. Beginning with the generosity of Andrew W. Mellon, and the dedication of directors David E. Finley and John Walker, the building of a collection of American paintings equal in quality to those of other national schools represented took time and patience. In 1996, Earl A. Powell III recognized the

curatorial accomplishments of William P. Campbell, John Wilmerding, Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., Franklin Kelly, and their associates in his foreword to the catalog volumes dedicated to *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century*. He also noted that American paintings represented the largest holding of any national school in the Gallery's collection.

With such strength, it might seem surprising that the sixty-sixth A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the Gallery presented this spring were

more than individual painters. They explored the meeting of art and life in nineteenth-century America. For those familiar with Nemerov's writings, which have ranged from studies of Frederic Remington, George Ault, and Raphaelle Peale to a historical examination of a performance of *Macbeth* during the Civil War, and from a meditation on the relationship between his father, the poet Howard Nemerov, and his aunt, the photographer Diane Arbus, to the photography of Lewis Hine, this, at least, comes as no surprise.

The Gallery's early dedication to the American collection presented no obstacle to such a series. Looking back to the planning for the lectures in 1945 by Huntington Cairns, general counsel of the Gallery, and Paul Sachs, creator of the first museum studies course in the United States at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum, the global reach of their ambition is evident. The original resolution of the trustees that lecturers be of "exceptional ability, achievement, and reputation," bringing to the American people "the best contemporary thought and scholarship," certainly did not exclude American scholars. The lists of possible speakers made by Cairns and Sachs reflect, however, a rather small domestic pool. Sachs suggested the traditionalist critic Royal Cortissoz, if he was strong enough; the archaeologist Alfred V. Kidder, on the American Southwest; Clarence Ward from Oberlin College, on Ohio architecture; James Johnson Sweeney, then at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); Lloyd Goodrich, then at the Whitney Museum of American Art; and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, also associated with MoMA and teaching



**Fig. 1. Thomas Cole, *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839, oil on canvas, Andrew W. Mellon Fund**

the very first Mellon series dedicated to the old masters of American art. In these lectures Alexander Nemerov of Stanford University addressed American painting in the 1830s, with special attention to such artists as Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and John Quidor (1801–1881). Nemerov's title, "The Forest: America in the 1830s," immediately established that the lectures were about

at Wesleyan University. Cairns added other names, including the Harvard literary critics F. O. Matthiessen and Harry Levin, Daniel Catton Rich of the Art Institute of Chicago, the urban visionary Clarence Stein, and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator A. Hyatt Mayor.

The Gallery was anxious to reestablish connections with Europe after the devastation of World War II. When the lectures finally began in 1952 there was an emphasis on French Thomist scholarship and on relationships between religion and aesthetics, an outlook that reflected the Jungian interests of Mary and Paul Mellon. We may regret that several of the names listed above never delivered the Mellon Lectures on the topic of American art, but we are surely grateful that the early years produced the lectures of Kenneth Clark, E. H. Gombrich, Siegfried Gideon, and Anthony Blunt, which resulted in publications of enduring influence. The first lectures by an American scholar were given in 1960 by Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis on the British writer and antiquarian Horace Walpole (1717–1797).

More was at stake for the Gallery in these decisions than cultural diplomacy or even national interests. There was a sense that the lectures might provide signposts for what the history of art could be. In the context of American art, the nomination of progressive Harvard critics and of curators from museums in New York City reflected Paul Sachs's influence. Between 1945 and 1960, however, the future of the history of American art in particular remained uncharted territory.

In her comprehensive discussion of the coming of age of scholarship in American art, published in the *Art Bulletin* in 1988, Wanda M. Corn (Samuel H. Kress Professor, 2006–2007) described the recent quantum leap in growth of the field. She contrasted the current situation with her own beginnings in the early 1960s, when most

prominent scholars in American art were self-taught (and often artists) or transfers from other fields, and often working in museums. The scholarly literature, as Corn put it, was then “minuscule,” and the issues for debate few, with a strong focus on the “Americanness” of the works in question and an emphasis on monographs. This changed with the growth of university programs: the first dissertation in American art, Corn recorded, was written by Sherman E. Lee, on American watercolors, at Case Western Reserve University in 1941. From this moment the field grew exponentially, very much under the influence of Benjamin Rowland at Harvard. Whereas Lee would go on to become a leading scholar of Asian art and a museum director of great stature, Rowland, an ardent watercolorist who also became a scholar of Asian art, took up the study and teaching of American art, supervising pioneering dissertations by, among others, Richard McLanathan, Jules Prown, Nicolai Cikovsky, William Gerds, Barbara Novak, William Homer, Stuart Feld, John Wilmerding, and Theodore Stebbins. In turn, these students became leaders in the field.

In a sequel to Corn's essay published in the *Art Bulletin* in 2003, John Davis (Wyeth Predoctoral Fellow, 1988–1990) described the study of the art of the United States as now more methodologically driven, culturally and historically more comprehensive, and affording greater public access to knowledge. Where Corn had pointed to the rarity of collection catalogs, many were now widely available, and Davis considered the Gallery's volumes “perhaps the Cadillac of the genre.” A member of the generation of new historians himself, Davis pointed to the controversial *The West as America*, organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1991, as an important turning point. Two new interpretive approaches dominated this exhibition and its catalog:



**Fig. 2. Lewis Hine, *Addie Card, 12 years old. Spinner in cotton mill, North Pownal, Vermont, 1910*, gelatin silver print, Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund**

a focus on context and social history and a close reading of individual works, often deploying the techniques of literary criticism and theory.

Alexander Nemerov's essay for the Smithsonian catalog was among the most controversial at the time. A quarter century has passed since its publication, and Nemerov's interpretations, often metaphorical and never literal, have gained respect. Whether the subject be Thomas Cole's *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)* (fig. 1), or Lewis Hine's *Addie Card, 12 years old. Spinner* (fig. 2), he seeks to find meaning that is not obvious at first sight: the “wooded realms of lived experience” in the Hudson River school, or, in the case of Hine, a mutual recognition of shared momentariness. For anyone seeking to understand Nemerov's view of Cole's *Crawford Notch*, on the other hand, there remains no better introduction than Franklin Kelly's entry in the Gallery's catalog of nineteenth-century American paintings. With an expanded collection of American art comes the possibility for an even more comprehensive and diverse art history. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*