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CASVA

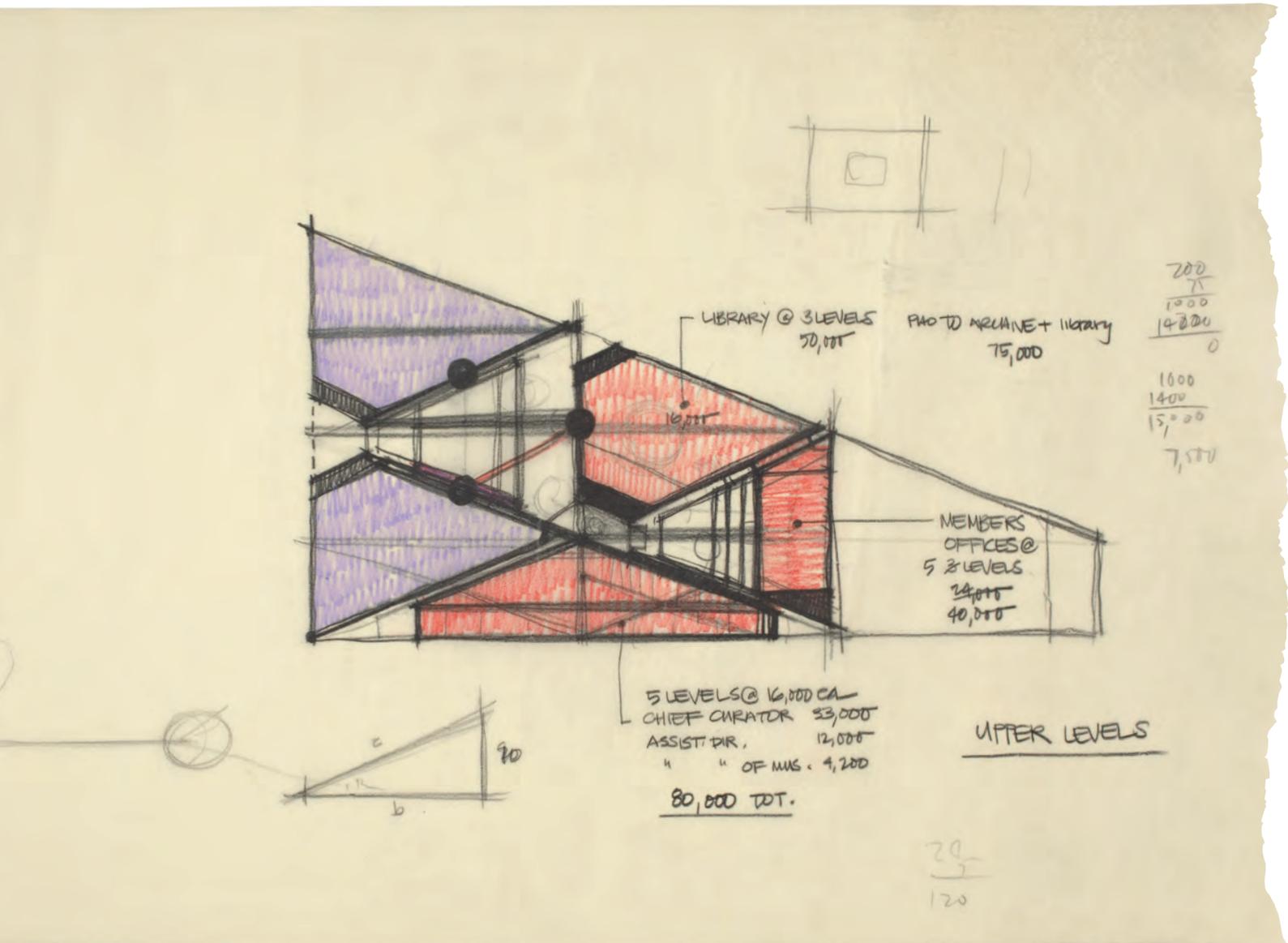


Fig. 1. I. M. Pei & Partners, East Building concept sketch for upper levels, c. October 1968, Gift of I. M. Pei & Partners

at Forty

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

The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts inaugurated its programs forty years ago. Such an anniversary, if not yet a half century, marks an impressive lifespan and presents a moment to look back over our history and also note some recent accomplishments. The opening of CASVA in 1979 was the fulfillment of a vision. Paul Mellon and Ailsa Mellon Bruce commissioned the East Building of the National Gallery to contain the new Center and the expanded library it would require, as well as galleries, and curatorial and administrative offices (fig. 1). In authorizing construction of the East Building in 1967, the United States Congress recognized that it would “house a Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts,” bringing together teachers and scholars from around the world. Ten years later, the trustees agreed that the Center should be fully operational in the fall of 1979, with funding for programs coming largely from the private sphere.

The decade of construction was marked by intense research into just what such a Center for Advanced Study should be. The plan came about in an expansive decade when Washington, DC, was set to become a cultural capital against a background of federal investment and the opening of the privately funded National Cultural Center at the Kennedy Center. The conclusions of a 1968 report prepared

by then-director John Walker and assistant director J. Carter Brown, and based on wide consultation, were simple (fig. 2). A growing number of art historians needed support and time for research and writing away from their daily responsibilities, as well as greater contact with original works of art. Scholars from overseas needed opportunities to study in the United States. A Center for Advanced Study could widen the Gallery’s capacity to serve the nation, strengthen connections with the scholarly community, and establish ties abroad. The Gallery was the ideal location because of its independence

Fig. 2. I. M. Pei, J. Carter Brown, and Paul Mellon, 1978. Photograph by Dennis Brack/Black Star



and efficient governance, and because its library and other resources of Washington were unmatched. It was also understood that qualified art historians who benefited from the programs of CASVA at an early stage would be better prepared for curatorial work. Looking back over forty years, this connection between universities and museums, fostered by the Center, has been a strength of art history in the United States.

The only requirement the initial report proposed for members of the Center was that they be “of the highest intellectual excellence, engaged in advanced research in art history and related fields.” No degrees were to be awarded, and members were to be treated as equals. There were to be no limitations on the fields of study represented, although it was expected that the focus would be on areas related to the Gallery’s collections and others in Washington, including thereby the collections of the Smithsonian and Dumbarton Oaks. From the very beginning, CASVA was given a generous, global mandate, something that looks farsighted today.

Even before the Center existed, the National Gallery was invested in scholarship. The trustees understood that a deep cultural void had opened up across the Atlantic during World War II. The professional study of art history was still in its infancy in the United States, and the impact of a generation of European refugee scholars was only beginning to be felt. In order to stimulate intellectual exchange around the fine arts, the trustees, with the support of Paul Mellon, inaugurated the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 1952. The first series of its kind in the country, it was designed to bring the “results of the best contemporary thought and scholarship bearing

Fig. 4. Luncheon with the 1982–1983 CASVA fellows in residence

upon the subject of the Fine Arts” to the people of the United States. Delivered by such noteworthy speakers as Jacques Maritain, Kenneth Clark, and Ernst Gombrich, the A. W. Mellon Lectures demonstrated that the National Gallery had a serious interest in advancing scholarship for the public good. Later series by art historians, from Kirk Varnedoe and Hal Foster to literary critic Helen Vendler, sustained public attention. Lectures on Chinese, Mayan, and Indian art also attracted large audiences. The mandated publication of the lectures in Bollingen Series XXXV by Princeton University Press expanded this audience, and in the past decade the lectures have reached an even wider public through digital media (fig. 3).

The Mellon Lectures, as well as the long-established Samuel H. Kress Professorship and several existing predoctoral fellowships, became the responsibility of the Center upon its opening. Building on this foundation, the mission expressed by the trustees has proven both firm and flexible enough to guide CASVA throughout the decades. Paul Mellon’s experience while studying at Cambridge convinced him of the value of conviviality and regular social gatherings in building an intellectual community (fig. 4). The common spaces of the East Building provided for this, and, through the generosity of Robert H. Smith, the Center has provided housing for fellows since 2005 (fig. 5). The possibility of living within walking distance of the National Gallery has enhanced the life of the Center and shaped its character in the twenty-first century in ways that Paul Mellon only imagined forty years ago.

Four programs laid out by founding dean Henry A. Millon continue to structure Center activities. These include the fellowship program, regular and special meetings, publications, and research.

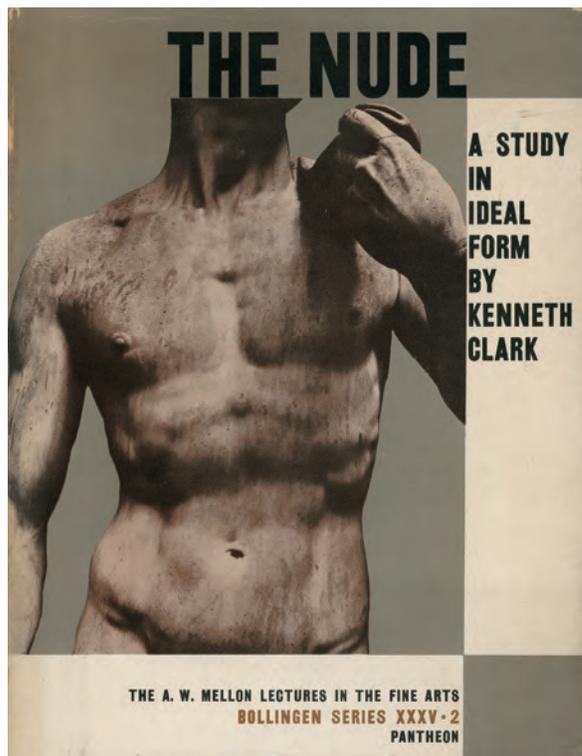


Fig. 3. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 1956, publication of the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, cover design by Herbert Bayer



Fig. 5. Robert H. Smith photographed in his home in Crystal City, Virginia, for *Apollo* magazine, 2009. © 2009 Brian Smale



**Fig. 6. 2018–2019 CASVA fellows
in residence**

The residential fellowship program is the most conspicuous of CASVA's activities for it brings new energy and ideas to the Gallery each year. In the predoctoral program there are now nine students in each class, with two being nonresident. Several fellowships are two or three years long, with time away for research, and so in any given year some twenty students are supported. In addition to traditional fields of European and North American art, the art of the wider world and contemporary art are now embraced, bringing the best new scholarship to the Gallery. The Center does not require members to work on specific themes, but shared ideas and common problems always emerge in the course of a year. In the past decades, several special initiatives, whether for scholars from East and South Asia, or paired fellowships for conservators and art historians working together, have opened up new areas of study. The Center's most recent special initiative is in the important area of African American art and scholarship, which is expanding to include all areas of

programming, as well as linking to work being done elsewhere in the Gallery.

CASVA's predoctoral fellowship program remains unique, indeed without parallel, in developing talented researchers through the experience of a scholarly community (fig. 6). Chosen from applicants in doctoral programs nationwide, these emerging scholars enjoy the regular company and sustained support of senior colleagues. This sort of open exchange is rare, but it is now generally recognized as a key factor in professional success and intellectual achievement anywhere. A curatorial liaison encourages daily engagement with the Gallery's collections and curatorial staff. During the past forty years CASVA's alumni have successfully pursued careers in museums, universities and colleges, and education in the broadest sense. Today museum work has become newly attractive among students seeking ways to interpret artifacts by understanding the manner of their making, finding value in the "material turn" in an increasingly virtual universe. The hope

is that academic and museum careers are not mutually exclusive.

Senior fellows, who may apply from anywhere in the world, are also chosen through a rigorous process of selection by CASVA's Board of Advisors (fig. 7). Since the Center's inception, the role played by the advisory board has been fundamental, and the work of the selection committees especially so. The board comprises seven or eight distinguished colleagues from around the country, who usually serve three-year terms. Their selection is guided by a principle of geographic, institutional, and scholarly range, and the board is more diverse today than ever before. Through its board, the Center establishes relationships with institutions across the country and abroad. In return, members of the board find that their work provides insight into new

developments and brings great rewards through the collegiality and stimulation of intense discussion.

Intellectual leadership is provided by distinguished professors appointed by the Gallery's Board of Trustees. Only one of these, the annually appointed Samuel H. Kress Professor, existed when CASVA opened its doors. The professorships now number three, and all are endowed. Like so many other initiatives at CASVA, these appointments are indebted in one way or another to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In celebration of the Gallery's fiftieth anniversary, the foundation endowed the Andrew W. Mellon Professorship. Inaugurated in 1994, this two-year appointment allows a scholar to conduct sustained research, while establishing close connections with the Center and the Gallery. Mellon Professors have

Fig. 7. Group of members of the 2017–2018 Board of Advisors: Emily Braun, Aden Kumler, Huey Copeland, William E. Wallace, and H. Perry Chapman



gone on to forge links with leading institutions worldwide: Nicholas Penny (2000–2002) and Miguel Falomir (2008–2010) could draw on experiences at CASVA as they took up the directorships of the National Gallery, London, and the Museo del Prado, respectively; Lynne Cooke (2012–2014) joined the curatorial staff of the Gallery. In 2002 the Edmond J. Safra Foundation established a professorship to bring a distinguished colleague with an interest in the Gallery's collections to CASVA for several months. In 2017, inspired by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation endowment challenge grant, the Safra Foundation donated funds to establish the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professorship in perpetuity. Similarly inspired by the Mellon Foundation's seventy-fifth anniversary challenge, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation endowed the Kress Professorship in honor of its retiring board chair, and National Gallery president, Frederick W. Beinecke, renaming it the Kress-Beinecke Professorship. Maryan Ainsworth from the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the first to be appointed with the new title (fig. 8).

The establishment of dedicated endowments has secured the programs of special meetings and publications. CASVA's symposia have been published

in the series *Studies in the History of Art* since 1984, and some sixty volumes have appeared. Digital access through JSTOR has widened readership, and several volumes have become standard reading. A second series of Seminar Papers has been published since 2005, the volume currently in development being titled *Black Modernisms*. Not all meetings are published, however; frequent small gatherings—colloquia, incontri, and shop talks—encourage informal discussion of scientific questions among colleagues, often including emerging scholars and curators from outside the Gallery. On many occasions in these informal meetings CASVA has benefited greatly from dialogue with members of the curatorial and conservation staff (fig. 9).

CASVA's own research projects provide significant reference materials and require genuine teamwork that is still unusual in the humanities. The *History of Early American Landscape Design* and the *Early History of the Accademia di San Luca* projects also rely on the exploration and exploitation of digital technology, something not imagined forty years ago. Digital projects are demanding and require the courage to innovate. In the past two decades, and with support from the Gallery's digital specialists, CASVA has opened doors to digital work in art history. In addition to regular postdoctoral research associates, and through the support of the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, CASVA has been able to appoint a research associate with a PhD in art history who is also a digital specialist. A new

Fig. 8. Maryan Ainsworth, Kress-Beinecke Professor, 2018–2019



Fig. 9. Dylan Smith, Shelley Sturman, and Nicholas Penny at the *Monumental Sculpture from Renaissance Florence: Ghiberti, Nanni di Banco, and Verrocchio at Orsanmichele* Robert H. Smith Study Day, 2005



network of digital art historians is in formation, and CASVA is excited to contribute to its future.

A century before CASVA's founding, universities in the United States, often guided by sectarian beliefs, were largely dedicated to the explication of the already known. The idea of research-based graduate education was imported from Germany to Johns Hopkins University in the 1870s, and other universities quickly responded to the need for unrestricted research. CASVA's founders also believed that the National Gallery could and should influence education through the discovery of new knowledge, and saw this as essential for future understanding of the visual arts. CASVA is creating new knowledge by bringing together outstanding scholars at all levels of

experience in a sphere of independence. Online access to many of these discoveries gives a public dimension to what CASVA does that furthers the National Gallery's overall mission.

The decades since 1979 have witnessed the establishment of various other research institutes dedicated to some aspect of art history, each with its own character and institutional connections. The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts remains unique as a truly national institution for research in the visual arts and as an intellectual community within a major national museum, with full access to its outstanding resources (fig. 10). The support of many friends has encouraged CASVA to thrive in ways that enrich the nation and the world of art in conformity with its founders' vision. •

Fig. 10. Fellows Allison Caplan, Megan Holmes, and Caitlin Beach in the *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* exhibition, 2018