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Yale's Art Department Commits Suicide

The shutdown of a Western survey course is a historic debacle

By Michael Lewis

Changes to an academic curriculum normally do not arouse public controversy, but we do not live in normal times. Yale University's decision to abolish its venerable "Introduction to Art History: Renaissance to the Present" has drawn considerable publicity and outrage, surely to the surprise of its instructors. For Tim Barringer, chairman of the art-history department, it was a straightforward act of modernizing. "No one survey course taught in the space of a semester could ever be comprehensive," he told the *Yale Daily News*, nor could any single course "be taken as *the* definitive survey of our discipline." Instead of that course's heroic journey from Michelangelo to Jackson Pollock, there will now be a changing roster of four different introductory courses, such as "Global Decorative Arts" or "The Politics of Representation."

For outside observers, this was yet one more sign of the American university's dereliction of its responsibility as the carrier of Western culture. Yale "has succumbed to a life-draining decadence" (*Wall Street Journal*), perpetrated by "a band of hyper-educated Visigoths" (*New York Post*). As Visigoths go, Yale comes late to the pillaging; for a generation now, universities have quietly been shelving their introductory surveys. Had Yale done so in the 1990s, as Harvard did, it would have passed unnoticed. Or perhaps not, for Yale holds an exceptional place in the history of American art education.

In 1831, Yale received a curious offer from John Trumbull, the artist whose paintings of the American Revolution hang in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Having fallen on hard times and having no assets other than his extraordinary collection of paintings, he proposed to give it to Yale on two conditions: that it build a museum to house them, and that it pay him an annual stipend of one thousand dollars. This was a radical suggestion for a university that had begun, as had Harvard, as a seminary for training Puritan ministers, whose visually image-free meeting houses were the physical manifestation of the commandment that thou shalt not make graven images. But out of deference to Trumbull, who was himself a veteran of the Revolution and whose father had been the governor of Connecticut, Yale accepted. The fact that he was 75 and evidently in poor health may have helped the decision (as it happened, Trumbull would live to cash 12 of Yale's checks). He himself designed the tasteful Greek shrine that housed his collection. And so America's first art museum—the first built exclusively for the care and display of a permanent collection of paintings—originated as a pension plan.

From this kernel grew the Yale School of the Fine Arts, whose classroom and studio building of 1869 were also the first of their kind in the country. Because the museum preceded the school, its instructors had a ready supply of objects from which to teach. To this day, the practice of teaching art using actual objects is one of the hallmarks of the Yale program; Barringer says the new dispensation will maintain the practice of bringing students “face to face with works of art and material objects of great beauty and cultural value.” Those who have not taken a course in art might be surprised to learn that this is not a universal practice, and that in progressive programs where conceptual art is the rule, it is fashionable to sneer at art as being too “retinal” (i.e., it gives the eye something to look at).

Yale continued on its distinctive path in the 20th century when it established a graduate program in medieval art. Beginning in 1932, it engaged two of France's leading historians of art, Henri Focillon and Marcel Aubert, who would teach in tag-team fashion, sailing over

in alternate semesters, expecting the graduate students to follow their lectures conducted entirely in French.¹ Focillon was the author of the influential *La Vie des formes*, *The Life of Forms*, which exalted the formal properties of a work—e.g., line and contour, body and mass, color and tone—over its narrative meaning. For Focillon, the form of a work of art was itself its chief content and meaning. Although he was a medievalist, his formal approach could be applied to works of art of any time and place, and his students would achieve distinction in the widest range of fields. For example, George Kubler, his student and successor at Yale, was a pioneering scholar of Pre-Columbian American art.

All this stood apart from the main channel of American art history, for which the decisive event was Hitler's rise to power in 1933. A whole generation of prominent art historians, most but not all Jewish, fled Germany; first came Erwin Panofsky, who was followed by Walter Friedlaender, Karl Lehmann, Julius Held, and Richard Krautheimer, who collectively made New York University into a kind of art-historical government in exile. Within a decade, NYU's graduate students were staffing art-history programs across America and teaching art differently from the way it was done at Yale. Panofsky's specialty was iconology, the interpretation of the rarefied language of signs and symbols embedded in Renaissance painting. If Focillon taught the *life* of forms, and the pleasure they give, Panofsky taught their *meaning*. The German émigrés of NYU brought art history to America as an intellectual pursuit, but at Yale it long remained what its French professors had made it, an aesthetic pursuit.

If you have not taken an art-history survey, you will not appreciate how essential is the element of showmanship. It is necessarily taught in darkness by means of projected images, usually shown in pairs. The impulse to fall asleep is strong and, if the room is overheated and the instructor's voice undermodulated, nearly irresistible. But in Vincent Scully, Yale

had a master showman, and over his 60-year teaching career, he made the survey a legend. Scully strode before the screen, speaking without notes and with staggering eloquence, roaring or whispering as needed, and pounding the floor with his long bamboo pointer to tell the projectionist to advance the slides.

A student who sees his professor get choked up over a work of art (and Scully was a great weeper) never forgets it. In the end, you did not simply learn a roster of buildings and paintings, which you can find in the books, but you learned what it was to stand eyeball to eyeball with a work of art, in existential confrontation, and bring to bear the whole of your humanity, your intellect and emotions and memories. It was a heady experience, and Scully inspired more than his share of students to go on to architecture school; the New Urbanism of the 1980s is in large part the work of his former students. Some of the outrage over Yale's abandonment of the survey course is due to its historical association with Scully, who retired officially in 1991 and who soon proved irreplaceable, none of his successors rising anywhere near his swashbuckling heights.

Academia is hardly lacking in articulate showmen with a sense of theater, but to run a broad survey course requires something more. To teach artists as different as Giotto and Picasso with lively enthusiasm—for without enthusiasm such a course is dead on arrival—requires that one be a generalist. Ideally one should have gregarious interests and a broad base of reading, but at a minimum one needs a fearless willingness to make broad assertions. But fearless generalists are thin on the ground in the modern university, where scholars prefer the safety of teaching within their own specialties. Even if Yale wanted to maintain its traditional survey of Western art, it would have great difficulty finding professors able or willing to teach it.

The abolition of the survey is only the tangible sign of deep-seated changes that have been going on in the field of art history, and largely invisible to the public. Until a generation or so ago, the unspoken premise underlying the teaching of art was that it was the expression of a civilization, and among the loftiest of its creations—as lofty as the music of Mozart or the drama of Shakespeare, and something about which one might take a certain proprietary pride. Art history quite naturally concentrated on those moments of great creative fervor, as in the 13th century or the High Renaissance, or the great galloping leap of artistic development that in the space of a lifetime vaulted from impression to cubism. That this art was Western, reaching all the way back to Classical Greece, was not something that required a justification or an apology.

What has changed, and what has made scholars squeamish, is any sense that Western art is “our” art. To emphasize the Western tradition is to validate it and be complicit in whatever historic crimes you might chose to impute to it, whether imperialism, colonialism, or environmental mayhem. The notion that some art is better than others, that some even rises to the pinnacle of human achievement, has become embarrassing. But even as the collapse of cultural confidence in the West was creating a void, that void was being filled from another quarter as scholars discovered that they could avoid making judgments of value by looking at art objects not as a connoisseur but rather as an anthropologist.

At Princeton, another program that offers “not a comprehensive survey but a sampling of arts . . . from diverse historical periods, regions, and cultures,” the anthropological methodology is explicit:

Like any social scientists or humanists, [students] must evaluate evidence (documentary, textual, or pictorial), form hypotheses, test their data, and draw conclusions. Successful majors master the translation of visual perceptions into linguistic or material expression,

develop their visual memory, and make connections with a wide array of other historical evidence.

It's as if the students were being asked to parachute into an unfamiliar culture with its own curious practices and beliefs, and to observe them with objective detachment. How they are to distinguish meaningfully, in terms of significance, between the *Pietà* and a vodka advertisement is not made clear.

In the process, the introductory survey has come to be disparaged as that most reactionary of things, the "grand narrative." This is the notion that the canon of Western art was an instrument of power, furiously exclusionary in purpose, meant to enforce existing systems of power relationships—the whole thing part of the elaborate machinery of oppression. As narratives go, that is about as grand as it gets.

On its face, there is nothing wrong in introducing students to non-Western art, as early as possible. But there is nothing new about that. Departments of art history have been doing that since the first half of the century, and Yale, blessed with stupendous resources in African and Asian art, is perfectly poised to do this in its expanded survey courses. But the cost of exchanging the survey for a smorgasbord of offerings is that there is no common frame of reference, no shared body of knowledge to which colleagues can relate their own discoveries and communicate them effectively to others.

Barringer of Yale is correct that no semester-long survey "could ever be comprehensive," but nobody ever claimed it could. What it does do is give the student a mental lattice into which new facts and objects can be fitted and related to one another. That lattice will inevitably be a rickety affair of generalizations and simplifications, but it will be refined and corrected over time; and without such a lattice to serve as system of order, all one has is a welter of free-floating facts.

The traditional survey was addressed to the general student, who might be destined for a career in business or medicine, but who felt a duty to acquire a minimum of cultural literacy and to be able to identify Michelangelo and, if pressed, say why he matters. The tragedy is that the new dispensation, by addressing itself to ever more theoretically sophisticated future graduate students, has turned its back on the curious non-art major.

The architecture critic Paul Goldberger, a product of the Yale system, once said that Scully's most important students were not architects and art historians but rather "the bankers and the lawyers who went on to support architecture," whom he turned into "informed clients." Yale's new curriculum has much to recommend it, and its continued stress on object-based teaching is admirable—but those bankers and lawyers won't be back. The department is unlikely ever again to draw the 300 students who are gathering now for the last hurrah of its old survey. Like every other program that has dismissed the Western tradition, its enrollments will fall. It's as if a minister had decided to aim all his sermons at prospective future ministers and addressed himself exclusively to the minutiae of theological dispute...only to wonder why the pews are empty next Sunday.

¹ The department of my own institution was created on the Yale model. See my "An Art Teacher's Art Teacher," COMMENTARY (April 2007).