

THE PROGRAM IN ART HISTORY

INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Courses in Art History at George Washington University were an early and ultimately significant component of the curriculum. The consideration of the discipline's distinguished past in this report is essential and timely as Columbian College of Arts and Sciences moves forward in the twenty-first century. Founded in 1821 and predating the Art History curricula of Princeton (1832), Yale (1869), and Harvard (1874), the Art History Program has evolved and reached maturation, while vigorously sustaining its core mission of providing students an exceptional education in Art History and connoisseurship.

From its inception, a major focus has been establishing cooperative ventures with cultural institutions in Washington, DC, initially with the Smithsonian American Art Museum (1829) and later with the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1869)/Corcoran School of Fine Art (1878), and the National Gallery of Art (1937).



GWU Graduates in front of Corcoran Hall, 1916

A review of its unique heritage after inception in 1821 opens this 2020 graduation celebratory document. This historical introduction provides the program's singular inception and development, and serves as a prelude to what the faculty considers as a story of continued academic expansion, constant professional creativity, and adroit flexibility in adapting to new circumstances and the aspirations of successive generations of students.

GWU's Art History Program 1821-1940s

When Columbian College was established in 1821 the curriculum included courses in Latin, Greek, English, geography, algebra, mathematics, history, antiquities, astronomy, chemistry, history of civil society, natural religion, metaphysics, natural and political philosophy [sic], and ethics. Initially, matters pertaining to art were lecture topics in courses on antiquities and philosophy in which students studied objects donated as early as 1825 for the purpose of establishing a College museum. However, in 1856 a course specifically designated as an art course was added to the curriculum of a financially struggling, but forward-looking institution. The course, "Shades, Shadows, and Perspective", was a requirement for the BA degree.

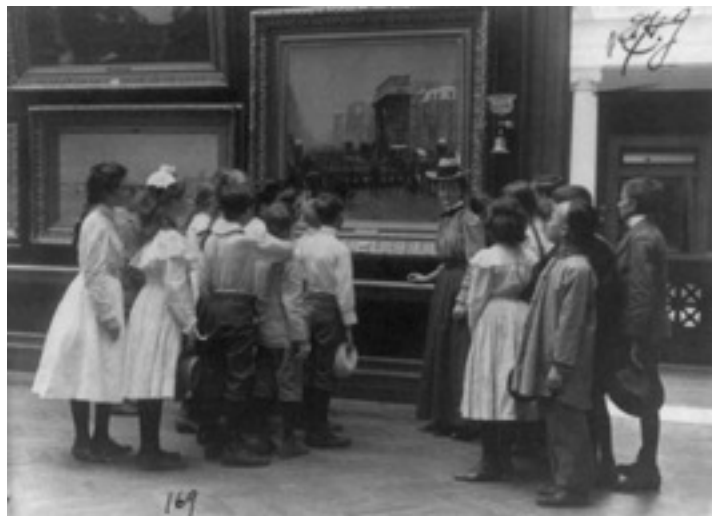


College Hill, Columbian College

The introduction of the arts in Columbian College coincided with the Smithsonian Institution's need to display its art collection, the acquisition of a collection for the Patent Building, and, most importantly, the growing influence of Board of Trustees member George Samson and some years later fellow member, philanthropist and collector, William Corcoran. As national awareness of the fine arts increased, the Washington Art Association was established. It provided an exhibition venue and financial support as well as a program of public lectures on art. Included among the speakers was trustee Samson who was appointed president of Columbian College in 1858.

Guided by Samson's belief in the importance of the arts to human development, in 1859 courses in Art Criticism and History of Art and Philosophy were required of all Columbian College students. Additionally, there were weekly lectures on US architecture. Students could attend lectures at the Smithsonian and study the Institution's original works of art. They also were encouraged to study Samson's personal collection, as well as view the paintings and sculptures displayed to the public in William Corcoran's home. By 1869 the latter's notable and extensive collection was contained in the Corcoran Art Gallery, the first art museum in the Nation's capital.

In 1867, following the end of the Civil War, Samson's effort to educate Americans culminated in the publication of his book, *Elements of Art Criticism*. It contained commentary on architecture, sculpture, and painting and a section on methods and materials and the teaching of art. Far in advance of its time, Samson's book included a section on the history of photography and it is probable that he was teaching courses on art.



Students at the Corcoran Gallery, early 1900s

With the retirement of Samson in 1871, courses in the practice of art were no longer taught in Columbian College. Interested students were directed to the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Although Columbian College initiated a proposal for a School of Fine Arts, it was never realized. This may have been because the College did not wish to be in competition with the recently established Corcoran School of Art. The School's founder was William Corcoran, who served as President and member of the Columbian College Board of Trustees. In these capacities Corcoran made a substantial contribution in directing a serious focus on the study of art.

In 1895-1896 the Columbiad, a predecessor to the University Bulletin, lists Architecture as an area offered in the Graduate School, while the Department of Fine Arts as Applied to Architecture is listed under the Corcoran Scientific School. Freehand Drawing, Architectural Drawing, and Practice in Designing Monuments, Buildings etc., are listed as well as lectures on the history of ornaments, painting, and sculpture. By 1905 Columbian University was renamed George Washington University. General courses were held at University Hall, 15th and H Streets and technical courses were taught at 813 15th Street. Courses in Watercolor and Life Drawing and Drawing from the Antique were held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and for a time courses in the History of Painting and Architecture, as well as Classical Archaeology. In 1905, the curriculum in what was now the Department of Arts and Sciences, included an introductory Survey of Art course and courses in Archaeology and Roman, Early Christian, Gothic, 16th-Century Italian art, as well as German, Flemish, British and American art.

In 1888 the first female students entered Columbian College. By 1924 the University boasted an enrollment of five thousand students, 2900 of whom were women. Three fourths of the students were part-time, evening students. (This large percentage of evening students continued to characterize the University into the late 1950s.) As evidenced in the 1925-1926 Bulletin, some restructuring of the curriculum in Archeology and History of Art as well as some expansion of the Architecture program was in progress. In the former, second and third group courses were components of a structure resembling the present Art History curriculum. It included a Survey of Art followed by courses in Ancient and Medieval Art, Renaissance and Modern Art. Additionally, cooperative programs with other institutions became an integral feature and it remains a component of the present day curriculum. This innovative and progressive spirit was sustained by successive generations of faculty. It is in evidence in today's Art History program.

GWU's Art History Program 1950s-1970s: The Grant Townhouse G Street NW

During the 1950s, although the majors and the curriculum were still the same, the History of Art was recognized as an intellectual, theoretical area of study in the College. With the support and encouragement of the latter, the Department of Art expanded in specialized areas of study to include: Ancient Art, Medieval Art, Northern and Southern Renaissance and Baroque Art, Nineteenth-Century European Art, Contemporary Art, African Art, Oceanic Art, North American Indian Art, American Art, Modern Architecture and Folk Arts. While elements of this program had been sporadically manifested in the past, the curriculum, retained in large measure today, was characterized by a logical historically based structure similar to that of other major universities.

Substantial changes occurred in 1959 when the Master of Arts in Art History and Criticism, the Master of Arts in Museology, the Master of Fine Arts in Painting, and the Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture were instituted. The program in Museology was one of the first to be established in the United States. Supported by the College and University, the Art Department faculty established internships at museums throughout the city as well as some beyond the Metropolitan area. The University Art Department provided - what was still uncommon - an opportunity for a professional experience to the graduate students in the Museology program. Although now under the Museum Training name, the museum internships administered by the Department of Art continue to be immensely successful.



Art Department 2000 G Street, NW

In 1974 the Art Department established a PhD program. Concurrently, lectures and seminars on Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American art and architecture were added to the curriculum. During this period of programmatic growth and expansion, the Department was increasingly viewed as a significant force in the teaching of Art and Art History in the metropolitan area and beyond. This is proven by both the quantity and especially the academic quality of student applicants during this period. They were attracted by the program as a whole, by specific areas of concentration, and by faculty reputation. Enrollments in the 1980s made the Department of Art History and Fine Arts the fourth largest department in Columbian College.

Despite its enhanced professional standing, the Department was still struggling with inadequacies of physical space totally unsuitable for teaching. Classes and faculty offices were housed in five buildings across the campus. Outdated and limited equipment, a woefully inadequate art history library and minimal slide resources were a considerable challenge. It was apparent to the faculty that major changes had to occur if the Art Department was to sustain its good record and reputation. These transformations occurred in the 1980s.

GWU's Art History Program The 1980s: Achievements, Preparation & Anticipation for the Future – Smith Hall of Art

The initial step in this process was the obtaining of the first major donation for the acquisition of an art book collection necessary for the maintenance and growth of the program. Discussions between the Chair (Lilien Robinson) and Board of Trustees member, Robert Smith, resulted in a significant contribution. Additional talks with the President of the University (Lloyd Elliott) resulted in University matching funds for library acquisitions. (These funds were supplemented in the next three years by the establishment of an endowed fund, Samuel Ebling Fund, for library acquisitions). These actions led to discussions between Robert Smith, the Dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) at the National Gallery of Art, and the Chair, Lilien Robinson, on establishing The Smith Distinguished Visiting Professorship in Art History (the recipient was concurrently appointed Senior Fellow at CASVA). This program was the only such cooperative venture between a university Art Department and the National Gallery of Art.



Exterior view of Smith Hall of Art

During this time, because of personal friendship and efforts of several members of the faculty (Arthur Hall Smith, William Woodward, Frank Wright and Lilien Robinson, President Lloyd Elliott, and Vice President for Development (Seymour Alpert), the Robert H. Smith family pledged the construction of an art building, the Smith Hall of Art. Smith Hall was designed and constructed with extensive involvement of the faculty. From the onset, the building was designed solely and specifically as an art facility. This close cooperation and interaction of the donors, architects, administration, and faculty resulted in a facility for which the architect was awarded a significant prize. Additionally, the Smith family provided the funds for the purchase of long needed equipment that brought the Department to a level of competition with other well-equipped modern arts facilities. The Smith Hall of Art continues to serve the Department extremely well. However, at present, programmatic changes in Art History have once again identified serious and severe inadequacies and require additional space to accommodate an expanded modern program, research and teaching methodology responsive to and supportive of contemporary ideas and requirements.

Beyond the 1980s: Building on the Achievements

The establishment of a professional program in Art History and Art History and Museum Training, the excellent campus location, the growing Gelman library collection, the continued cooperation and engagement with the National Gallery of

Art, as well as the Smithsonian, Dumbarton Oaks, the Walters Gallery, and other institutions, have been of extraordinary significance to our academic program which now has full-time faculty holding Ph.D. degrees from Johns Hopkins University, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, New York University (Institute of Fine Arts), University of Texas at Austin, University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. Recent adjuncts are from Harvard, Columbia University, New York University, UC at Berkeley, etc.

Since the initial introduction of the arts on the GWU campus, the teaching of Art History has been via a circuitous route. Understandably, there have been a variety of plans, approaches, and emphasis with respect to study research methodology and pedagogy in the discipline. These were affected by finances, competition of local institutions, changing philosophies, population changes, the economy, and general attitudes towards the arts.



Photo of Pushkin Statue outside Smith Hall of Art

Similarly, the initial plan for a Fine Arts School was surely affected by the focus of William Corcoran and the Corcoran Gallery on the merging of collecting and teaching, and ultimately by the establishment of the Corcoran School of Art. The early

focus upon architecture has been continued in the theoretical and historical study of national and global monuments. Actually here at the beginning architecture–theory and practice– was a dominant field and while not identified as primary, the study of architecture has been sustained throughout the Art History curriculum.

The Art History program has responded with ease and flexibility to the changes in the discipline. This is evidenced by the loss of the PhD degree program about 1998. While it could not be sustained primarily because of funding issues, the students who completed the program did so in a commendable manner. Conversely, both the MA in Art History with a focus on Museum Training (Curatorial Studies) and the BA/MA degree programs have been highly successful in preparing students for excellent professional positions that many have attained. Consistent with its nineteenth-century beginnings, the Art History program (graduate and undergraduate) continues to focus on “traditional” fields of Art History while encompassing and encouraging engagement in other areas of art historical investigation.

Responding to contemporary thoughts and needs, the curriculum now includes courses in Islamic Arts, Asian Arts (India and Indonesia, China, Japan, Korea), History of Photography, History of Textiles, and African-American Art. Additionally, specialized lecture classes and seminars address connoisseurship in courses on Collectors and Collecting, Royal Residences and Patronage, Cities and their Monuments, Landscape Architecture. The Art History program also has expanded its links to other disciplines in the Arts and Sciences (Anthropology, Classical Archaeology, Philosophy, History, Judaic Studies, etc.). All faculty members are very active in their profession and alert to new ideas, orientation, and trends. The organizational structure of the Art History program is sound and provides a firm foundation for further innovative advancement in response to changing educational needs. Sharing in an illustrious historical heritage, the Class of 2020 will build upon that foundation.